

Minutes

of the Meeting of

The Children and Young People's Services Policy and Scrutiny Panel

Thursday, 29 June 2023

New Council Chamber - Town Hall

Meeting Commenced: 10.00 am

Meeting Concluded: 12.09 pm

Councillors:

Joe Tristram (Chairperson)

Wendy Griggs (Vice-Chairperson)

Nicola Holland

Clare Hunt

Sue Mason

Richard Tucker

Martin Williams

Apologies: Councillor Michael Pryke.

Absent: Councillors Marc Aplin, Annabelle Chard and Tom Nicholson.

Also in attendance: Councillor Catherine Gibbons.

Officers in attendance: Sheila Smith (Director of Children's Services), Pip Hesketh (Interim Assistant Director, Education Partnerships), Becky Hopkins (Assistant Director, Family Support & Safeguarding), Matt Greenhalgh (Head of Service - Improvement Lead for CWD and SEND), Brent Cross (Policy and Scrutiny Senior Officer), Philippa Penney (Head of Democratic and Electoral Services), and Liz Godfrey-Day (Policy and Scrutiny Support Officer).

CAY Election of the Vice-Chairperson for the 2023/24 Municipal Year

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The Chairperson welcomed Members and officers to the meeting, explained the role of the Panel, gave an overview of Children's Services from the scrutiny perspective, and gave his thoughts on the direction of travel of the Service.

The Panel then nominated for the position of Vice-Chairman.

Recommended: that Councillor Wendy Griggs be elected as Vice-Chairman for the 2023/24 municipal year.

CAY 2 Addresses by Members of the Public (SSO 9)

None.

CAY 4 Declaration of disclosable pecuniary interest (Standing Order 37)

None.

CAY 5 Minutes

Minutes of the Panel meeting held on 20 October 2022 – to approve as a correct record.

Notes of the informal panel meeting held on 24 February 2023 – for noting.

Recommended: that

i) the minutes of the meeting of 20 October 2022 be approved as a correct record; and that

ii) the notes of the informal meeting of 24 February 2023 be noted.

CAY 6 Matters referred by Council, the Executive, other Committees and Panels (if any)

None.

CAY 7 Role, Remit and Work Plan of the CYPS Policy and Scrutiny Panel

The Senior Policy and Scrutiny Officer presented the report detailing the Panel's role and allowing the opportunity for Members to discuss the work plan. Members were referred to the appendices for guidance on how best to utilise the Panel's resources to obtain meaningful outcomes.

Members considered the working groups of the Panel under the previous administration and would discuss and form working groups before the next meeting following further discussion.

Recommended: that Members of the Panel develop the Work Plan before the next meeting.

CAY 8 Performance Monitoring

The Performance Monitoring report was presented by the Assistant Director, Children's Family Support and Safeguarding, and included an update on the Ofsted inspection of Children's Services on 13 March 2023, a performance analysis of relevant Key Corporate Performance Indicators for quarter 4 of 2022/23, and an overview of the performance of relevant key service measures for support and safeguarding services.

The challenges of recruiting and retaining social workers were highlighted along with the news that ten new social workers had been recruited and would be starting work in the weeks following the meeting.

Members requested clarification on the following (officer responses in italics):

- Who could refer a case to Children’s Social Care? *These could be partner agencies, such as schools, the police, hospital / medical services, or even families, children wishing to refer themselves, and anonymous referrers.*
- The statistical neighbours mentioned in the report seemed to be both larger and more rural than North Somerset, and there was concern that the disparities between experiences in Weston and the rural areas were not reflected in these statistical neighbours. *The statistical neighbours had the same proportion of rural and town populations as North Somerset, and Children’s Services had internal ward-level details on the differences between the rural and urban centres.*

Following these, Members engaged in more general discussion about whether some of the reported rises in Child Criminal Exploitation, Domestic Abuse and Child Sexual Exploitation were a result of an increase in reporting or an increase in incidence; how parents with poor mental health were supported through the Whole Family approach; the feedback from care leavers now in employment, education or training on what worked for them and how to support those not in employment, education or training; and the possible reasons for social workers not being retained.

Recommended: that the report be received, and that Members’ comments be forwarded to officers in the form of minutes.

CAY Ofsted Inspection Update

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The Director, Children’s Services, introduced the report which gave a summary of the findings of the Ofsted inspection of North Somerset Children’s Services in March 2023. The overall outcome of the inspection was that the service was judged Requires Improvement to be Good.

The inspection found progress in several key areas, and judged the service provided to care leavers in North Somerset as Good, but it was noted that not all areas of improvement identified at the last inspection in March 2020 had been addressed and that progress had not been sufficient. The service received the Requires Improvement to be Good judgement in the following: the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families, the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection, and the experience and progress of children in care.

The service was in the process of updating the Service Plan to ensure that all of the areas for improvement were fully addressed, and this would be submitted to Ofsted in August 2023.

In discussion, the following topics were addressed:

- That the service was aware of areas of weakness going into the inspection and that the fragility of the workforce a big factor in, and a key determinant of, the improvement journey.
- That there were Central Leadership Team discussions ongoing to provide stability to the workforce in the context of the financial pressure on North Somerset Council generally, and that the cost of failure was many times higher than the financial cost.

- That the Mockingbird Programme for fostering would be explained to new Members in a Children's Directorate briefing, and that there were only two authorities in the country with more Mockingbird hubs than North Somerset.

Recommended: that the report be received, and that Members' comments be forwarded to officers in the form of minutes.

CAY 10 SEND Improvement Plan and Safety Valve

The Assistant Director for Education Partnerships presented the report on the SEND Improvement Plan and Safety Valve projects and included details on the eight areas of significant weakness that had been identified in the 2017 inspection by the Department for Education which following revisits had now been reduced to four. Officers were waiting to hear back on the remaining four areas of weakness imminently, and were preparing for the next inspection.

The details of the Safety Valve funding were discussed, and it was shared that the directorate had received about £20m of funding to spend towards this over five years. Members were also informed of the new school for children with SEMH (Social, Emotional and Mental Health) needs that was to open in 2024, were reminded of the second site for Baytree School, that the very successful Nurture groups used profiles devised by Marjorie Boxall, and that North Somerset now had the only fully staffed Educational Psychology team in the South West.

In discussion, it was pointed out that the conditions for the Safety Valve funding had been negotiated, rather than imposed, in a very productive set of discussions with the Department for Education. The key to reducing the shortfall in the Special Needs Block was to improve quality of providers, so that North Somerset's offers could successfully compete with the independent sector. The comparative performance of the independent sector was also being scrutinised.

Recommended: that the report be received, and that Members' comments be forwarded to officers in the form of minutes.

CAY 11 Month 12 Children's Services Budget Monitor

The Principal Accountant (Children's) presented the year-end budget monitor for Children's Services. There had been an overspend of £2.256m, caused mainly by the cost pressures of placements for Children Looked After and support for Children with Disabilities. Contrasting with this, there had also been a reduction in staffing costs, although this had been a result of unfilled vacancies which were now being addressed.

The additional growth (£3.023m) of the Children's Services budget in the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2023-24 was highlighted, along with projected cost savings of £764 000 that would need to be made.

In discussion it was clarified that the Direct Payments mentioned in paragraph 3.17 referred to payments made directly to parents following a social care assessment. Members noted that dissatisfaction with the way these were administered had been expressed by some parents in the past, and suggested that an officer could report to the Panel on this.

Recommended: that the report be received, and that Members' comments be forwarded to officers in the form of minutes.

Following a brief further discussion of the Work Plan, the Chairperson thanked the outgoing Director, Children's Services (Sheila Smith) and the Associate Director, Children's Family Support and Safeguarding (Becky Hopkins) on behalf of the Children and Young People's Policy and Scrutiny Panel for all the work that they had done for Children's Services and North Somerset Council and wished them well in their future endeavours.

Chairman
