

# **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

## **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 5 JUNE 2025**

**Councillors Present:** Dominic Boeck, Paul Dick (Chairman), Owen Jeffery, Martha Vickers, Clive Taylor, Billy Drummond (Substitute) (In place of Martin Colston) and Alan Macro (Substitute) (In place of Janine Lewis)

**Also Present:** Councillor Clive Hooker

**Apologies for inability to attend the meeting:** Councillor Janine Lewis, Councillor Martin Colston, Councillor Jane Langford and Councillor Louise Sturgess

**Officers/Others Present:** AnnMarie Dodds (Executive Director – Children's Services), Neil Goddard (Service Director – Education), Dora Gouveia Schofield (Principal Social Worker and Academy Lead), Sonia Harris (Service Manager), Sue O'Brien (Complaints and Access to Records Manager), Melissa Perry (Principal EWO/Lead Officer for Safeguarding), Rebecca Wilshire, and Tony Wilson (Director, Oxford Diocesan Board of Education)

### **PART I**

#### **1 Election of Chairman**

Given that neither the Chairman nor the Vice-Chairman were present at the start of the meeting, the Clerk invited nominations from those Members present to act as Chairman for the duration of the meeting. Councillor Billy Drummond proposed Councillor Paul Dick. This was seconded by Councillor Martha Vickers. No other nominations were received. At the vote, the motion was passed, and Councillor Dick assumed the Chair.

The Chairman noted that Tony Wilson and Catherine Hobbs had been nominated as the Church of England and Roman Catholic Diocese representatives on the committee. Although they would not be formally co-opted until the next meeting of Council on 17 July, the Chairman indicated that they would be permitted to speak to any of the Part I items on the agenda.

#### **2 Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 15 May 2025 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **3 Recommendations and Actions Tracker**

It was noted that previous recommendations to the Executive from the Scrutiny Commission and actions arising from meetings of the Commission had been reallocated to the tracker of each of the new scrutiny committees where relevant.

Members reviewed the actions from the previous meetings. The following points were noted:

- **178** - The performance dashboard had not been included in the latest SEND/Delivering Better Value report – this would be covered in a future report.

#### **4 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received at the meeting.

**5 Petitions**

There were no petitions to be received at the meeting.

**6 LGA Review of Children's Social Care**

Sonia Harris, Service Manager, presented the report on the LGA Review of Children's Social Care (Agenda Item 6).

The following points were raised in the debate:

- Members welcomed the many positives highlighted in the LGA review.
- It was noted that the review had identified limited evidence of reflective supervision. Officers explained that all social workers had 1-2-1 supervision, with space provided for reflection. There was limited time for reflection on group case supervision due to the number of children, but meetings were being made more structured to ensure it was included.
- Members asked about areas for improvement identified in the review around early intervention and closer working/communication with partners. Officers confirmed that they were looking at how to involve schools and health colleagues in group case supervision.
- Concern was expressed around practitioner workload. It was acknowledged that while caseloads varied, there was a trend of increasing complexity. Caseloads were constantly reviewed, less experienced staff were being trained to take on more complex cases, and additional staff were employed to meet demand as necessary.
- Officers confirmed that the number of agency staff had reduced over time and accounted for just 15% of social workers employed by the Council.
- Members asked about children not in education. Officers indicated that where they were known, social workers would seek to get children back into education and socialising. It was acknowledged that there were children who had been impacted by Covid who had missed early years education, but agencies were working together to address this. Anyone aware of a child that was missing school was encouraged to report this. The Council was in the process of developing an attendance strategy, which would go out to consultation in September. It was noted that the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill would facilitate monitoring of children not in school.

**Action: CYP Scrutiny Committee to be consulted on the draft Attendance Strategy.**

- It was confirmed that for the Peer Challenge, the reviewers selected which cases to review.
- Members asked about the Children in Need Pilot. It was explained that alternatively qualified practitioners were supervised by social workers/ managers. The aim was to provide intensive early support to prevent future statutory intervention. Results were positive and an example was provided.
- Officers were asked about the involvement of fathers. It was confirmed that social workers always tried to involve fathers as early as possible. Again, an example was provided.
- It was noted that feedback was always sought from children and families about what had gone well and how things could be done differently. As a result of feedback received, changes had been made to how family time sessions were run, and these changes had been well-received.

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 5 JUNE 2025 - MINUTES

- Members asked if any students had managed to get degrees through the i-College.

**Action: Officers to confirm qualifications gained by i-College students.**

- It was suggested that the most challenging actions in response to the LGA review would be around recruitment and retention of staff. It was difficult work and managers needed to listen to and support their teams.
- Officers were asked if senior staff were allocated casework. It was confirmed that the role of managers was to support staff, and they did not generally take on cases themselves, since this would reduce their capacity to provide that support. The exception was adoption work, since staff needed to have a certain level of experience.
- Members acknowledged the fostering campaign that had been run locally and asked if a similar campaign could be run in relation to recruitment of social workers. It was explained that the Council had been successful in recruiting and retaining social workers and reducing reliance on agency staff. Thanks were expressed to the Council's HR service and the Social Work Academy.

**RESOLVED** to note the report.

### 7 **Castle Gate Ofsted Report**

Dora Gouveia Schofield (Principal Social Worker and Academy Lead) presented the Castle Gate Ofsted Report (Agenda Item 7).

(Councillor Dominic Boeck joined the meeting during discussion of this item.)

The following points were raised in the debate:

- Officers were congratulated on the 'Outstanding' assessment.
- It was noted that 22 children currently attended Castle Gate and there were seven children on the waiting list.
- It was confirmed that Castle Gate was the only facility providing short break respite care for families in West Berkshire.
- Officers indicated that they were in regular contact with other local authorities to exchange best practice information.

**RESOLVED** to note the report.

### 8 **Ofsted and CQC Thematic Review Into Children Who Are Not in School**

Neil Goddard (Service Director - Education and SEND) presented the Ofsted and CQC Thematic Review Into Children Who Are Not in School (Agenda Item 8).

The following points were raised in the debate:

- Members noted that some children were being diagnosed as SEND when all they actually needed was support with school readiness and socialisation. Officers stressed that early intervention was key. Parents were being encouraged to take up their early years entitlement. Lots of work was being done around the transition into primary schools, and work was ongoing with schools to delivery early interventions that kept children in mainstream schools where they would achieve the best outcomes.
- Members noted that the report appeared to indicate support for parents had decreased over time. It was suggested that support from health visitors and the

## **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 5 JUNE 2025 - MINUTES**

Family Hubs was key. Officers agreed about the importance of health visitors. Signposting to local services had improved, so parents could find appropriate support. Also, take-up of the early years offer delivered significant benefits. In addition, family hubs were being developed to deliver support to a broader age range of children. The decrease in support mentioned in the report referred to the historic situation, but the focus was now moving back to early intervention, early years and early help.

- Concern was expressed that parents who were not online might not be aware of the local offer, and that more active support may be required. It was confirmed that the local offer was aimed at professionals, so they could alert parents they worked with, as well as through local libraries and family hubs. It was acknowledged that there were still hard to reach families who may not be engaged, but strategies were being put in place to reach them.

### **Action: Officers to bring an update on the family hubs to a future meeting of the CYP Scrutiny Committee.**

- Members noted that the report had flagged concerns about a lack of a clear strategy for alerting professionals across agencies about children not in education. Officers provided assurance that they were working more closely with colleagues in health and social care through the Strategic SEND Board, so the right professionals were informed and involved. Appropriate training and support were also being provided.
- Officers were asked if there were areas of good practice that had not been implemented in West Berkshire. It was acknowledged that the Council could do more around joint commissioning and officers highlighted that an advert was out for a new joint commissioner post.
- Members noted that the report had flagged difficulties experienced by parents in accessing therapy support and asked about the planned system review. Officers explained that existing commissioned therapy services did not make provision for children who were not at school. However, this gap would be addressed as services were recommissioned. Any issues regarding waiting lists would need to be referred to the Integrated Care Board for response.
- Concern was expressed about children not in education who were presenting at the crisis service with acute mental health needs, having not being identified earlier. Officers explained that the Dynamic Support Register was used to identify children at risk of escalating to Tier 4 services and to ensure they received timely support. This was reviewed by a panel of professionals that included representation by colleagues in Education and Children's Social Care and allowed for effective planning across agencies. Members asked to see data related to the register.

### **Action: Officers to provide data in relation to the Dynamic Support Register.**

- In relation to respite care, officers confirmed that there were 22 children using the service, with seven on a waiting list. The numbers who benefited in any given year varied due to the churn amongst service users.
- Members noted that social workers had no authority to intervene where a child had been excluded from school, but where home-schooling was considered inappropriate. Officers explained that parents had a right to elective home education and local authorities had few rights to intervene beyond safeguarding and asking the parent to provide a curriculum. If the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act was passed, this would mandate a register of home-educated children, and local authorities would be able to support and challenge parents to ensure that the education provided was

## **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 5 JUNE 2025 - MINUTES**

appropriate. It was noted that a significant number of children subsequently returned to school because their parents struggled with home-education.

- Officers were asked about what was being done to reduce the number of permanent exclusions. It was confirmed that there had been 48 exclusions already this year compared with a historic average of 8 to 12. Work was being undertaken to prevent exclusions, but more needed to be done. The i-College provided excellent alternative provision, but more short-term turnaround provision was needed.

**Action: Officers to bring a report on exclusions to a future meeting of the CYP Scrutiny Committee.**

- Officers were praised for how well they worked with primary schools around emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA), but it was recognised that this was more a problem for secondary schools. Officers were asked about the scale of the problem, what was being done to encourage schools to buy into the EBSA service, and whether there were additional challenges in relation to academies. It was confirmed that the service was offered to all, but schools could choose to manage the issue in different ways, and some had good internal processes. It was recognised that there needed to be closer working with schools to ensure the quality of support provided. Officers highlighted challenges with quantifying EBSA, since there was an element of self-diagnosis. The team worked with schools to support young people at risk of EBSA as well as those who were missing school.

**Action: Officers to bring a report on attendance to a future meeting of CYP Scrutiny Committee.**

**RESOLVED** to note the report

### **9 Delivering Better Value in SEND Closedown and the Innovation in SEND Delivery Plan**

Neil Goddard (Service Director – Education and SEND) presented the Delivering Better Value (DBV) Closedown Report (Agenda Item 9).

The following points were raised in the debate:

- Members asked for further details of the ‘very significant risks’ that remained in the system. It was explained that need was increasing, and the Council was unable to meet that need as effectively and financially viably as officers would like. Covid legacy was still driving increased demand for SEND, and the Council was heavily reliant on costly independent provision, where quality was variable. There was an aspiration to manage services in-house and to tailor provision to better meet local need and achieve the best possible outcomes for local children.
- It was noted that the Scrutiny Commission had previously had an update on the High Needs Block and there had been a commitment to bring a report back to a future meeting.
- Members asked about the Strategic Direction and noted that some of the proposals in the Action Plan provided a commentary rather than setting out next steps. Officers indicated that Members had already seen the SEND Strategy and the Delivery Plan was intended to sit beneath this. Many of the actions were at the system level rather than being for the Council to deliver. Officers explained that this report was more focused on the DBV programme, but offered to bring a report back, which better linked the action plan to the SEND Strategy.

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 5 JUNE 2025 - MINUTES

- Members asked about how the Delivery Plan would be managed, noting the proposed timescales, and suggested that a future report would be welcomed on how it was progressing. Officers explained that groups had been set up to progress each of the priority areas, but it was acknowledged that some of the timescales were still being firmed up.

**Action: Officers to bring a report on the High Needs Block and implementation of the SEND Strategy Delivery Plan to a future meeting.**

- Members noted that some issues were more related to health and may need to be considered by the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee.

**RESOLVED** to note the progress made through the DBV programme and to endorse the next steps set out in the Action Plan.

### 10 Executive Forward Plan - May to August 2025

The Committee considered the West Berkshire Forward Plan for the period covering May to August 2025 (Agenda Item 11).

It was noted that the following items were due to be considered by the Executive in September:

- Corporate Parenting Annual Report
- Youth Justice Annual Plan
- Care Leaver Annual Report
- Early Help Response Hub Annual Report

**RESOLVED** that the Forward Plan be noted.

### 11 Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

The Commission considered its work programme (Agenda Item 12).

The following additions and changes were proposed:

- Children not in Education (11 September 2025)
- SEND High Needs Block (11 September 2025)
- Ofsted Children's Social Care Inspection (11 September 2025)
- Process for Appointing Young Person Co-opted Members (11 September 2025)
- Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (4 December 2025)
- Curriculum and Assessment Review (4 December 2025)
- School Accountability Reform (4 December 2025)
- Impacts of Declining Birth Rates on Local Schools (4 December 2025)
- Prevention, Early Help and Family Hubs (slip to 4 March 2026)
- Permanent Exclusions (4 March 2026)

A potential task and finish group was proposed to look at mobile phone use amongst children and young people. This was a recommendation emerging from the Children's Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Task and Finish Group set up by the Health Scrutiny Committee. It was agreed that Task and Finish Groups would be discussed at the next meeting.

**Action: Discuss potential Task and Finish Groups at the September meeting.**

**RESOLVED** to note the work programme.

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 5 JUNE 2025 - MINUTES

### 12 LGSCO Recommendations Report

Sue O'Brien (Complaints and Access to Records Manager) presented the LGSCO Recommendation Report (Agenda Item 10).

It was noted that the report had a confidential appendix, which would require the meeting to move to Part II if the committee wished to discuss it.

**RESOLVED** to note the LGSCO Recommendation report.

### 13 Exclusion of Press and Public

Councillor Owen Jeffery proposed to move the meeting to Part II to permit discussion of the confidential appendix to Item 10 on the agenda. This was seconded by Councillor Alan Macro. At the vote, the motion was carried.

**RESOLVED** that members of the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following items as it is likely that there would be disclosure of exempt information of the description contained in Paragraphs 1 and 2 of [Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972](#), as amended by the [Local Government \(Access to Information\)\(Variation\) Order 2006](#). [Section 10 of Part 10 of the Constitution](#) refers.

### 14 LGSCO Recommendations Report

*(Paragraph 1 - Information relating to an individual.)*

*(Paragraph 2 – Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual.)*

The Committee considered the exempt appendix to the LGSCO Recommendation Report (Agenda Item 14), which provided details of the action plan developed by West Berkshire Council to address the LGSCO's recommendations.

**RESOLVED** to note the action plan.

*(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.24 pm)*

**CHAIRMAN** .....

**Date of Signature** .....