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CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 11 SEPTEMBER 2025

Committee Members Present: Councillors Dominic Boeck (Chairman), Owen Jeffery, Jane Langford, Alan Macro, Louise Sturgess, Martha Vickers, Clive Taylor, and Billy Drummond (Substitute) (In place of Janine Lewis), and Emily Daly (Co-opted Member)

Also Present: Stacey Clay, Hannah Geddert (SEND Strategy Officer), Neil Goddard (Service Director - Education and SEND), Vanessa Grizzle (Principal Educational Psychologist), Sue O'Brien (Complaints & Access to Records Manager), Melissa Perry (Principal EWO/Lead Officer for Safeguarding, Education), Nicola Robertson (QAAS Service Manager), Rebecca Wilshire (Service Director - Children's Social Care) and Dave Wraight (Service Manager - Youth Offending Team),

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Janine Lewis, Councillor Paul Dick and Tony Wilson (Co-opted Member)

Absent: Catherine Hobbs (Co-opted Member)

PART I

15 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 5 June 2025 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

16 Actions from previous Minutes

Members reviewed the actions from the previous meetings. No further updates or comments were received.

17 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

18 Petitions

There were no petitions to be received at the meeting.

19 Youth Justice Annual Plan

Dave Wraight presented the Youth Justice Annual Plan (Agenda Item 6).

The following points were raised in the debate:

- Members praised the quality of the report.
- It was noted that the report included a large number of acronyms.

Action: Include a glossary to explain acronyms used.

- Members noted the increase in suspensions/exclusions from schools. It was acknowledged that there was a clear link to offending. Schools could refer pupils at

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risk of offending to the Positive Intervention Programme (PIP). This sought to divert young people from crime and reduce suspensions/exclusions. Also, a focused diversion pilot to target children suspended from school was about to be rolled out with the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC).

- Concern was expressed about the increase in incidents of violence perpetrated by girls. This was not unique to West Berkshire, and the problem seemed to have its origins in online activity. Despite the increase, most violent offences were still committed by boys.
- Members asked if officers worked with children aged under 10 years. It was confirmed that 10 was the age of criminal responsibility. Younger children could be referred to Children's Services as a safeguarding issue. It was considered important not to give young children a criminal identity and to support them in a positive way.
- It was noted that food was being offered to young people/their families. Officers had found that children were coming to sessions hungry and were unable to concentrate. Referrals were also made to food banks.
- It was explained that the cohort of children engaged by the team fluctuated year-on-year, but overall numbers were relatively small.
- Members noted the increase in drug use. The Youth Justice Team was co-located with The Edge and there were good synergies between the services. Also, a drug diversion programme was being delivered in conjunction with Thames Valley Police (TVP), which connected young people into The Edge.
- It was acknowledged that there had been an increase in the number of girls referred to the Youth Justice Team. This mirrored the national trend, but the increase had been more pronounced in West Berkshire/Thames Valley. The reasons for the increase were unclear.
- Clarification was sought regarding the terms 'gravity' and 'substantive outcomes'. It was explained that each offence was given a gravity score related to its seriousness. Substantive outcomes were appropriate for more serious crimes and were recorded on the national police system. Informal outcomes were not recorded and would not appear in DBS checks.
- Members asked if the 2025/26 priorities for education, training and employment were sufficient, or if there was more that could be done. Officers indicated that they worked closely with colleagues in Education, schools and colleges and advocated for young people to sustain their education. Some children had speech/language difficulties, and the team had a therapist who could support them. However, there was always more that could be done and there was a clear case for early investment.
- It was noted that some primary schools had very low numbers of exclusions but exclusions for the same pupils jumped significantly when they moved up to secondary schools. At primary school, classes had an individual teacher who knew each child well, but at secondary school they had multiple teachers. It was recognised that neurodiverse pupils often struggled with the transition and colleagues in Education were doing more to support them. It was recognised that suspensions varied significantly between schools and there may be opportunities to share learning.
- Members asked if statistics were affected by cross-boundary issues. Officers confirmed that children from other areas may be placed in West Berkshire and vice versa. The service had a dual responsibility and the data captured both cohorts. It

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was noted that some children were placed a considerable distance away from home, which was more problematic.

- Members asked about restorative justice. Not all crimes had a specific victim and where there was one, take-up of direct restorative justice was low, since often victims did not want to meet the perpetrator. However, indirect restorative justice was more common (e.g., letters). Restorative justice needed to be timely in order to be effective, but this was sometimes difficult to achieve.
- It was suggested that more could be done to facilitate conversations between young people and older people to address concerns and improve mutual understanding. It was confirmed that work was ongoing with partner organisations to address anti-social behaviour. Meetings could be arranged as part of that activity. The OPCC had recognised this as good practice.
- Officers were asked if more needed to be done around reducing exclusions. It was confirmed that suspensions/exclusions had been recognised as a strategic issue. Best practice was being shared across Thames Valley, and a Safer Schools Officer had been reinstated by TVP. Operationally, it was important to respond quickly to changes in trends. The Team advocated for a Therapeutic Thinking approach in schools and worked closely with them to support and retain young people in education.
- Members asked how the Team worked with the Building Communities Together Partnership (BCTP). It was confirmed that there were several officers in BCTP who had close working relationships with the Youth Justice Support Team. The Team was represented on the BCTP Board where they were able to raise/escalate issues and seek feedback on ideas.
- There was discussion about the effectiveness of prevention letters and PIP. It was noted that the COO of the Youth Justice Board had visited West Berkshire to learn about these initiatives as examples of best practice. Evidence showed that preventative measures were effective in helping to change children's behaviour before they committed a crime. As a result, very few children went to court. Also, schools had been good at identifying suitable children to be referred to PIP.
- Members asked about over-represented groups. Officers were trained in terms of diversity and disproportionality and made effective use of screening tools. Programmes were tailored to the particular needs and learning styles of individual children. The Team had staff who engaged with particular groups such as the Traveller community.
- It was recognised that long delays in the restorative justice programme could be disheartening for victims. Work was underway with the OPCC and Chief Constable around improving timeliness. The Team's Victim Worker was very good at keeping in touch.
- Members asked if young people slipped through the net and if this caused problems later. It was recognised that children may commit crimes before they are caught. However, it was felt that there was a strong police response and numbers not caught were thought to be lower than previously.
- There was discussion around whether children saw bad behaviour as something to boast about. Officers indicated that they worked hard to avoid stigmatisation and give children a criminal identity.

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- Officers were asked how they would allocate funds in an ideal scenario. It was noted that a custodial sentence was the most costly outcome, with those imprisoned often repeat offending. The team had reduced the number of children going into custody from 18 to 1 per year, saving the public purse millions of pounds. Preventative work, building pro-social values and keeping children in education were seen as key elements.
- The David Gauke report on reforming the justice system was welcomed. However, the number of people in the prison estate needed to reduce to free up funds to implement the proposed measures.
- Members asked about the changes to the TVP reorganisation. Officers indicated that the new arrangements were bedding in well.

RESOLVED to note the report.

20 **Children's Services Complaints and Compliments Annual Report 2024/25**

Sue O'Brien (Complaints and Access to Records Manager) presented the Children's Services Complaints and Compliments Annual Report 2024/25 (Agenda Item 7).

The following points were raised in the debate:

- The Committee welcomed the fact that complaints from children and young people were always prioritised and congratulated officers on the number of compliments received.
- Further detail was sought regarding the 'information' outcome as set out in paragraphs 5.46-5.48 of the report. It was explained that previous analysis had not considered whether complaints were upheld or not – the focus had been on responding. However, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) was clear that local authorities should acknowledge where they were at fault and show how they were learning from mistakes. This approach had now been adopted.
- Members asked about action to address criticism concerning the lack of sincerity in responses. It was explained that LGSCO training was being rolled out, which stressed the importance of acknowledging where things had gone wrong and admitting fault. Learning opportunities were being identified and shared within teams, with changes made to policies and processes where appropriate.
- Presentational issues were highlighted. Officers explained that the Communications Team would tidy up the report prior to publication.

Action: Officers to amend charts in sections 5.35 and 6.7 of the report to make them easier to read.

- There was discussion about the staff resources used to create the Central Team. It was confirmed that the existing East and West Teams had been made slightly smaller, but transformation funding had been used for assistant team managers to improve oversight and line management.
- Members asked about common themes in complaints. Officers indicated that communication was a common issue (e.g., not keeping the customer updated, not responding to queries in a timely manner, etc). It was recognised that it was important to build trust and develop relationships with families from the outset. The work often involved difficult conversations, so how the service was delivered was key.

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- In terms of changes made, there had been a focus on training. Also, cases were reviewed where things had gone wrong to learn lessons, and new policies were often developed in response to findings.
- Officers were asked about how they were reducing delays in handling complaints. This was achieved through regular reminders and training. Realistic timescales for responding were set and clearly communicated with the customer. Customers were also given information on where they could go for independent advice.
- Members asked for details of specific complaints that had led to service improvements. It was confirmed that the main improvement had been around timescales for responses. Also, the service was working better with fathers. Training had been provided for staff around why and how fathers should be informed and included, particularly where they did not live in the same household.
- There was discussion about how children were supported to make complaints. It was confirmed that advocates were used, and children could speak to any member of the team. The complaints process and pathway options were clearly communicated. Statutory routes were always used with children's complaints. If complaints went to Stage 2, then an independent investigating officer would be assigned. Children were always listened to without judgement about what they were saying.

RESOLVED to approve the report subject to changes being made by the Communications Team to address presentational issues.

21 Child Protection Annual Report 2024-25

Nicola Robertson (Service Manager – Quality Assurance and Safeguarding) presented the Child Protection Annual Report 2024-25 (Agenda Item 8).

The following points were raised in the debate:

- It was not known why West Berkshire had a higher number of children on protection plans than the national average. There had been an upward trend since the Covid pandemic. Cases were more complex and there were more issues around financial hardship, as well as drug and alcohol abuse, which often accompanied issues around neglect and physical harm. Discussions with other local authorities in the South East suggested that similar trends had been observed elsewhere. It was noted that national statistics lagged behind local reporting.
- Members asked if schools were employing officers to get absent pupils back into school. It was confirmed that attendance was highly scrutinised, involving multi-agency child protection conferences. Schools had pastoral support workers and designated safeguarding leads, and headteachers and tutors attended child protection conferences.
- There was discussion around the approach to preventing and tackling domestic abuse, and the links to mental health. Officers stated that frontline staff followed the family safeguarding model. Domestic abuse workers and adult mental health staff were co-located within these teams. Social workers sought to work with families to break the cycle of domestic abuse. In some cases, levels were insufficient to go through the courts, and people could not be made to engage. Often, perpetrators did not have sufficient insight to accept that they exhibited that behaviour, which could lead to repeating patterns. Women were encouraged to use Clare's Law to check their partner's history, but some chose not to. In some cases, women were being

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convinced that they were to blame. It was noted that children growing up in homes where domestic abuse was present may believe that such relationships were normal.

- Members asked why 80% of repeat child protection plans were considered unavoidable and what more could be done. Officers indicated that there were only 10 families where repeat plans were applied. The challenge was where the non-abusive partner formed a new relationship with a new abuser. Officers confirmed that cases remained open for 3 months after a child protection plan was closed, and contact was phased down in this period. Decisions to close were evidence based and were taken when professionals had done all they could for the family. They made sure that families knew where to go for support if they needed it. Officers were considering how they could work in different ways with victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse.
- Concern was expressed about staff welfare and whether additional support was needed. It was confirmed that all staff had daily contact and monthly supervision with their manager. There was a good staff support system available, and staff could access counselling and confidential support. It was recognised that conferences could be emotional, so debrief sessions were held with staff afterwards. It was suggested that additional business support staff would be helpful due the rising caseload.

Action: CYPSC Chairman to ask the Lead Member for Children and Family Services to look at business support resources in Children's Services to see if there is a need that is not being met.

- Recruitment and retention were discussed. It was acknowledged that the work could be traumatising, which naturally led to churn in social work staff. It was difficult to attract staff due to competition with neighbouring authorities, who were offering attractive packages. However, work had been done recently around recruitment and retention, which had led to the proportion of agency staff reducing from 32% to 11% in the last year. The remainder were mostly covering sickness and maternity leave. In future, the aim was to have a greater focus on staff retention and wellbeing.
- Members highlighted issues around parental mental health and asked about the role of health visitors. It was confirmed that social workers worked closely with health visitors who had great insight and understanding of their patients. They attended conferences and went the extra mile to support families. However, they had significant challenges due to large caseloads. Previously, health visitors and social workers would have made joint visits, but opportunities to provide in-person support had reduced, and increasingly checks were made over the phone/online, or required the parent to attend a clinic. It was recognised that if parents had poor mental health, they may not attend. Officers felt that changes in health visitors' working practices had been felt most keenly in relation preventative work and early help.
- There was discussion about the use of advocates in child protection conferences and how the data had been presented. It was explained that for complaints, children had a right to an advocate, and one must be provided. West Berkshire Council went a step further by facilitating independent advocacy for any child who might benefit from this. The National Youth Advisory Service was commissioned to provide 300 advocacy contacts per year. This had recently been increased. Officers undertook to review the table to make the headings clearer and to include data about how many times an advocate had been present. It was noted that Child Protection Chairs ensured that the voice of the child was heard in all conferences. Even when a formal advocate was not present, the child would have been supported to speak to a trusted adult.

Action: Officers to review the table on child advocacy.

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- Members asked how parents' views on conferences were captured. Child protection chairs held pre-meetings with families and asked them about their experiences. The report highlighted cases where negative feedback had been received and changes introduced in response. Also, social workers regularly checked in with families throughout the process. There were plans to give families more of a voice by using family decision meetings, where they would be supported to come up with their own plans to be fed into the conferences. Such plans were logged within the Children's Services system.

RESOLVED to note the report.

22 SEND High Needs Block and Implementation of the SEND Strategy Delivery Plan

Hannah Geddert (SEND Strategy Officer) presented the report on SEND High Needs Block and Implementation of the SEND Strategy Delivery Plan (Agenda Item 9).

The following points were raised in the debate:

- It was confirmed that officers were working with schools to help them self-assess for the Dyslexia Friendly Award.
- Expansion of provision at the Castle School was welcomed.
- Members asked about what could be done to address capacity constraints affecting annual reviews. It was noted that two interim officers had been appointed to support the annual reviews, particularly around Years 6 and 11 transitions.
- There was discussion about the review of the Capita One system. There were concerns as to whether this would be able to meet the Council's needs, and so alternative systems were being reviewed. A business case was being developed for an EHCP Hub, which would reduce administration time, while providing access to necessary data.
- Members asked if the SEND Youth Forum would be re-established. This had previously been run by SENDIASS. It had subsequently been brought in-house and had been run by an apprentice, but the apprenticeship had come to an end and there had not been capacity to maintain it. SEND children in care still had their voices heard through separate participation networks. A retendering exercise was planned, and a market engagement exercise was underway. It was hoped this would pick up the Youth Forum aspects.
- There was a question around local special education capacity. It was noted that Interim Special Education Development Officers were undertaking analysis regarding special education needs vs provision in West Berkshire. Castle School had already expanded and work was ongoing with other schools regarding possible new units for autism and SEN.
- Members asked how the strategy's priorities had been chosen. It was explained that there had been a lot of surveys and co-production work undertaken. Although priorities had changed slightly for the current version of the strategy, previous work had not been lost. Task Groups had been set up to look at emotional based school avoidance and short breaks.
- Increased SEND was noted, but officers were asked if there was evidence to show that this was leading to better outcomes. Officers confirmed that this would be picked up through the annual review process.

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- Members asked how young people were supported into employment and independent living. It was explained that Internship Work Grant had been used to fund the supported employment provider, Ways into Work. A SEND Employment Forum had been created in West Berkshire and work was ongoing to create something at the Berkshire level. Ways into Work were working with Newbury College to deliver supported internships, and WBC was looking to offer supported internships too. An employer event had been organised to provide information on supported internships which had attracted over 80 attendees and featured a case study of a young person who had been helped into permanent employment through the scheme.
- Members asked about learnings from the recent Ofsted review. It was confirmed that the SEND Delivery Plan actions were reviewed in the light of the Ofsted findings. Lots of the Ofsted recommendations had already been incorporated into the strategy.

RESOLVED to note the report.

23 Young Person Co-opted Members

Gordon Oliver (Principal Policy Officer – Scrutiny and Democratic Services) presented the report on Young Person Co-opted Members (Agenda Item 10).

The following points were raised in the debate:

- Members welcomed the proposal.
- It was suggested that the iCollege be approached for nominations.
- Members asked how the two co-optees would be selected. It was confirmed that this would be done via interviews. Interviews would be good preparation for transition to adult life.
- It was suggested that young people may need advocates to help them articulate their views. It was noted that this would be part of the role of the organisation appointed to provide support for the co-optees.
- Members noted the safeguarding issues and asked if it would be better for the co-optees to join remotely or to attend meetings in person. Officers suggested that the needs of the individual should be considered (i.e., whether they had a quiet space at home). It was also noted that there were practical/safeguarding issues with ensuring they were able to get home safely after the meeting. However, Members felt that it would be better for the young people attend in person if possible. It was noted that this happened at Corporate Parenting Panel.

Action: Officers to review whether the young people could attend in person rather than remotely.

- It was suggested that the requirements for co-optees to be bound by the Members' Code of Conduct and to sign a Declarations of Interest form were too onerous. Officers confirmed that the Monitoring Officer had been consulted. However, all co-optees needed to be clear that there were certain standards of behaviour expected at meetings.
- Members questioned whether the co-optees should be 'non-political and independent'. It was suggested that if they were formally affiliated to a particular political party, then this may affect the political proportionality of the committee. However, it was highlighted that the co-optees would be non-voting, so they would not impact on political proportionality. It was suggested that the advert could simply say

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that this is not a political role. However, the important thing was for the arrangement to work successfully.

Action: Officers to check the requirement for co-optees to be 'non-political and independent' with the Monitoring Officer.

- There was a question about parental consent. This had been covered in the report as part of the proposed safeguarding protocols. In addition to seeking parental consent for their child to participate, parents would also be copied in on all correspondence.
- Members asked about the allowance for the co-optees. Officers stated that this would be paid pro-rata depending on the start date. Normally, it would be paid in 11 instalments.
- It was suggested that nominees be encouraged to watch recordings of previous meetings.
- Officers were challenged to ensure that the young people had real impact. It was noted that there would be training for Members and the co-optees. Also, it was proposed to check-in with the co-optees after each meeting to ensure they understood the papers and had sufficient opportunity to contribute. Also, it was suggested that it would be important for the Committee to choose topics that would be of interest to the young people. It was noted that consideration was being given to a Youth Forum, which would provide another opportunity for youth engagement.

RESOLVED: That the Committee endorse the proposed approach, including:

- (a) The proposed process and timescales for the recruitment of two young people as Co-opted Members of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee.
- (b) The proposed support arrangements to be put in place for the two young people.
- (c) The proposed training to be provided to the young people, Members and other Co-opted Members of the Committee.
- (d) The proposed safeguarding protocols to be put in place

24 Executive Forward Plan 1 September to 31 December 2025

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

Members did not ask to review any reports before they went to Executive for decision.

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan be noted.

25 Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

The Committee considered the proposed work programme (Agenda Item 12).

It was suggested that the Youth Council report should come to the December meeting to coincide with the proposed Youth Takeover Day.

It was noted that a report on mobile phones policies for schools had been proposed previously. This had originally come from the Children and Mental Health Task Group. There had been media reports of students doing much better at schools where mobile phones had been banned.

Members queried if the Children and Mental Health Task and Finish Group report needed to come to Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee.

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It was also suggested that the committee could look at making more effective use of school buildings in school holidays and options for reducing the cost of holiday activities.

Members highlighted that a number of suggestions had been made at the previous meeting, which had not been incorporated into the work programme.

It was proposed that the Ofsted Children's Social Care report be pushed back to December.

Action: Officers to update the work programme and circulate to Members for comment.

RESOLVED to note the work programme.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.20 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature