

DRAFT

Note: These Minutes will remain DRAFT until approved at the next meeting of the Committee

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 4 DECEMBER 2025

Members Present: Dominic Boeck (Chairman), Owen Jeffery (Vice-Chairman), Paul Dick, Billy Drummond, Jane Langford, Alan Macro, Louise Sturgess, Martha Vickers, Clive Taylor, Charlie Gale and Natasha Rowe

Also Present: AnnMarie Dodds (Executive Director - Children's Services), Neil Goddard (Service Director - Education and SEND), Melissa Perry (Principal EWO/Lead Officer for Safeguarding, Education) and Rebecca Wilshire (Service Director - Children's Social Care), and Olive Kayongo (West Berkshire SEND Parent Carer Forum)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Tony Wilson

Absent: Emily Daly and Catherine Hobbs

PART I

26 Election of Vice-Chairman

RESOLVED that Councillor Owen Jeffery be appointed as Vice Chairman of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee for the remainder of the 2025/26 Municipal Year.

27 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 September 2025 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

28 Actions from previous Minutes

Members reviewed the updates on actions from previous meetings.

For Action 25-11, it was noted that a detailed update could not be provided until the Council-wide review of business support had been completed.

29 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

30 Petitions

There were no petitions to be received at the meeting.

31 Children's Scrutiny Board Report: Local Authority Statutory Duties Around Attendance

Melissa Perry (Principal Education Welfare Officer/Lead Officer for Safeguarding) presented the report on Local Authority Statutory Duties Around Attendance (Agenda Item 7).

The following points were raised in the debate:

- Officers indicated that the reasons for absenteeism were multi-faceted.

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- After the Covid pandemic, attendance in West Berkshire had been worse than the national average, but performance had since improved, and it was now better than average.
- Members noted that there was no explicit mention of bullying in the report – officers indicated that this was one of a wide range of issues affecting attendance.
- It was explained that each school sought to address issues through its own tailored action plan.
- Officers confirmed that the statistics in the report included pupils from Traveller communities.
- It was suggested that West Berkshire Council should compare itself to similar local authorities. Officers explained that, with the exception of Reading, the other Berkshire authorities were regarded as statistical neighbours.
- Officers were encouraged to read the Covid and Recovery Task and Finish Group report, since this had highlighted impacts on attendance and had recommended reallocation of resources to address these.
- Members asked if there were individual schools that had been particularly successful in improving attendance, and whether learning could be shared with other schools. It was confirmed that schools were matched so weaker ones learned from stronger ones.

Action: Officers to provide detailed statistics on individual schools that had been most effective in improving attendance.

- It was suggested that leaders of strongly performing schools could be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee to share insights on how they had improved attendance.
- It was requested that acronyms be explained in all future reports.

Action: Officers to explain acronyms in all future reports.

- Officers explained that the Attendance Team only provided advice to schools and did not employ any Education Welfare Officers (EWOs). However, many schools employed their own family workers. The importance of providing early support for families was recognised.
- It was noted that the Council offered comprehensive training for schools and their attendance leads, and was in regular contact with schools throughout the year to discuss their needs.
- Officers confirmed that the Attendance Working Group included representatives from: the Parent Carer Forum, Youth Service, Thames Valley Police, Youth Justice Service, schools, Social Care, Complaints, Virtual School, and the voluntary sector.
- Members asked if the loss of Council EWOs had put extra pressure on schools, and if this had led to issues around attendance. Officers explained that the role of local authorities in relation to attendance had changed, and the Council was managing as best it could to meet statutory responsibilities.
- It was noted that funding had been devolved to allow schools to employ their own staff, and the current WBC service had been co-designed with schools.
- Officers confirmed that stats were used to inform how resources were deployed to deliver focused projects with schools.

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- It was hoped that the Attendance Strategy would lead to improvement. Officers indicated that the Strategy would continue to evolve over time.

The Committee voted to suspend Standing Orders to permit Olive Kayongo (SEND Parent Carer Forum Chair) to speak. Ms Kayongo made the following points:

- Some children and young people were unable to attend schools because their mental health was so severely impacted.
- Some children experienced suicidal thoughts and were being kept home for safeguarding purposes.
- Some neurodivergent children experienced significant challenges - although they wanted to be educated, they struggled to be in school.
- Local evidence suggested that the problem was getting worse for SEND children.
- Parents had told the Parent Carer Forum that they found it challenging to navigate the system - some were worried about fines, while others struggled to communicate that their children could not attend school for medical reasons.
- Key groups were autistic children and those with sensory difficulties. In some cases, children were in school, but they were not receiving education, because they could not learn in that environment. Others could not get beyond the school gates.
- Parents needed to be heard and services co-produced to support them.

Members entered into further debate and the following points were discussed:

- It was confirmed that alternative options to school were explored where appropriate, including the iCollege. The aim was to identify issues as quickly as possible.
- Officers indicated that reasons for persistent absence were multi-faceted and staff worked with each school to develop tailored plans.
- It was stressed that, as with safeguarding, every service within Children's Services had a part to play in addressing attendance.
- It was explained that 'persistent absence' referred to attendance rates of less than 90% and 'severely absent' referred to attendance rates of less than 50%.
- Members noted that some schools had members of staff appointed to lead on attendance, which delivered good results. These roles often included other responsibilities (e.g., safeguarding, or behaviour) that were linked.
- It was suggested that it may be helpful for the Committee to do a deep dive scrutiny review to look further at issues around attendance.

ACTION: The Committee to programme a deep dive review on Attendance.

RESOLVED to note the report.

The Committee voted to resume standing orders.

32 Ofsted School Inspection Reports

Neil Goddard (Service Director – Education and SEND) presented the report on School Ofsted Inspections (Agenda Item 8).

The following points were raised in the debate:

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- Although Ofsted had appeared keen to listen when engaging with partners, the revised assessment framework did not seem to reflect feedback provided, and there were concerns about how the new inspection process might be implemented. It was stressed that all new inspections would be led by HM Inspectors, which would generate learning that would be shared.
- It was noted that the tables in the report referred to percentages rather than absolute number of schools.
- Members asked about the different categories of schools and the Council's role with each. Officers indicated that they would be happy to explain the categories and stressed that every child educated in West Berkshire was the Council's responsibility. Members indicated that they would welcome additional training.

Actions:

- **Officers to provide a briefing for Members on the different categories of schools.**
- **Members to liaise with Democratic Service re future training needs.**
- It was acknowledged that Ofsted inspections were just one measure of a school's success.
- Officers provided reassurance that parents and pupils had an opportunity to contribute to the Ofsted assessment process.
- It was recognised that one word Ofsted inspection outcomes had been problematic. Although this would be replaced by a scorecard that gave a broader view, it could still not provide a complete picture.
- Members expressed concern that parents may solely use Ofsted inspection results to choose schools for their children. Officers agreed and recommended that parents visit schools to understand how they could meet their needs. Also, it was noted that periods between inspections could be long, and so inspection results could be out of date.
- It was noted that every school rated as 'inadequate' had an action plan. The Service Director for Education and SEND had termly meetings with the headteacher, chair of governors, and principal school improvement advisor allocated to the school, to monitor implementation of the action plan. Officers also met with Ofsted every half-term, and Ofsted undertook regular monitoring visits with schools.
- Officers confirmed that they monitored all schools across a range of indicators throughout the year. If they had concerns, then they would raise those with the school. Support could be provided to the governing body, or the governing body could be replaced if appropriate. Officers had support meetings with each school annually. There was also a multi-disciplinary Schools Causing Concern Group, which could put in place packages of support for schools that were struggling.
- It was noted that each school was controlled through its governing body. The Council had more powers in relation to non-academy schools, but if officers had concerns about academy schools, they could speak to Ofsted. Support was offered to academies where it was appropriate to do so by the Council and through academy chains.
- Members congratulated Theale CofE Primary School in achieving an outstanding grade in all aspects of their latest Ofsted inspection.

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- Members indicated that they would welcome the opportunity visit a school.

RESOLVED:

- (a) To be informed of the latest Ofsted inspection outcomes for schools in West Berkshire;
- (b) To use the information to help inform its future work programme.

33 Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) Report October 2025 (EX4745)

Rebeca Wilshire (Service Director – Children's Social Care) presented the report on the Ofsted Inspection of Children's Social Care (Agenda Item 9).

The following points were raised in the debate:

- Members noted that the Early Help Partnership had been identified as an area requiring improvement. This was partly outside of the Council's control, as it needed partners to engage. However, both the proposed Children and Young People's Board, and the newly formed West Berkshire Safeguarding Partnership included key partners who could help to develop the Early Help Partnership.
- Officers confirmed that Children's Social Care had good relationships with health visitors and school nurses, but the development of Family Hubs would help to improve partnerships further and identify emerging issues even earlier.
- It was suggested that senior managers could take on cases themselves to reduce pressure on their teams. Officers confirmed that while this happened occasionally, particularly for adoption, it was not done routinely, because it was important for children to have continuous relationships with their social worker. Also, if Ofsted saw significant numbers of cases allocated to managers, then they would deem those cases to be 'unallocated'. This happened in September 2023 when Ofsted undertook a focused visit. They had indicated that the service had been significantly away from being rated as 'good' at that time.
- It was highlighted that agency staff currently accounted for just 10% of social workers, down from 33% two years ago. Some of those were in the process of converting to permanent positions.
- Officers confirmed that more young carers had been identified and were being supported. Although there were some carers waiting to be assessed, this did not preclude the Council from providing support. Family Hubs would provide additional support within local communities, which would be accessible to young carers.
- It was noted that recording had improved to ensure that the voice of young people was better captured. Also, as social workers finished their engagement with families, they sought regular feedback from the parents and children. Additionally, from January 2026, audits would include calls to families and children.
- Officers gave assurance that timelines would be developed for the action plan. Some of the actions were linked to with the Family First Partnership reforms. From April 2026, the Council would be required to identify its first flagship Family Hub. Similarly, central government would set out dates by which family help actions would need to be completed.
- The Committee agreed to formally extend their congratulations to the Executive on the 'good' Ofsted rating.

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Action: The Chairman to write to the Leader of the Council to congratulate the Executive on the 'good' Ofsted inspection result.

RESOLVED to note the report.

34 Executive Forward Plan September to December 2025

The Committee considered the Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 10).

Members asked to see response to the Children's Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Task Group. It was noted that the Task Group's report had previously been circulated to the Committee.

Action: The Task Group's report to be recirculated for information.

There was discussion around the Schools Funding Formula. It was noted that this was set nationally. Officers offered to share the detailed papers that went to the Schools Forum.

Action: Officers to share Schools Funding Formula papers that went to the Schools Forum.

It was noted that the Forward Plan did not go beyond March 2026, and it was requested that this have a forward view of 6-12 months in order to give the Committee a chance to identify items for pre-scrutiny.

Action: Officers to update the Forward Plan

Officers confirmed that the Youth Council report was being amended and it was expected that this would come to the next meeting of the Executive as originally planned.

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan be noted.

35 Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

The Committee considered the proposed Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee Work Programme (Agenda Item 11).

Members of the public had suggested topics for scrutiny, including:

- The Council's approach to SEN Tribunals and
- The Council's policy on Education Other Than At School (EOTAS).

It was noted that work was underway to look at SEN Tribunals, and the Council was in the process of developing an EOTAS policy.

The following changes to the work programme were agreed:

- Attainment of Children on Free School Meals to be considered at the March meeting.
- SEN Tribunals and the EOTAS Policy to be considered at the September meeting.
- A deep dive to be carried out on School Attendance.

Actions:

- **Develop terms of reference for a deep dive on School Attendance.**
- **Officers to respond to members of the public who had proposed topics for scrutiny.**

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(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.20 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature