

# 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 JUNE 2026

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

**Also Present:** Councillor Heather Codling (Deputy Leader and Executive Portfolio Holder for Children and Family Services), AnnMarie Dodds (Executive Director - Children's Services), Ashley Milum (Service Director for Education and SEND), Anisah Pathan (SEND Strategy Officer), Fiona Simmonds (Assets Operations Team Leader), Rebecca Wilshire (Service Director - Children's Social Care), Gordon Oliver (Clerk) and Darius Zarazel (Zoom Host)

**Apologies for inability to attend the meeting:** Emily Daly, Charlie Gale and Tony Wilson

**Absent:** Catherine Hobbs

#### PART I

#### 3 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 15 April 2026 were approved as a true and correct record subject to the following correction and signed by the Chairman:

- That the attendance list should be amended to make it clear which attendees were Councillors.

The Minutes of the meeting held on 14 May 2026 were approved as a true and correct record and were signed by the Chairman,

#### 4 Actions from previous Minutes

Members reviewed progress in relation to actions from previous meeting.

Additional updates were noted as follows:

- 25-11 – The Business Support Review was currently on hold.
- 26-1 – Councillor Codling hoped to be in a position to give an update on funding at the next meeting.
- 26-3 – It was confirmed that work had started on the performance dashboard.

#### 5 Declarations of Interest

Councillors Billy Drummond and Clive Taylor declared interest in Items 6 - 8 by virtue of the fact that they were a trustee at St Bartholomew's School and a governor at the Calcot Schools respectively. As their interests were personal and not prejudicial or disclosable pecuniary interests, they determined to remain to take part in the debates and vote on these matters.

#### 6 Petitions

There were no petitions to be received at the meeting.

### 7 **Response to the DfE Regional Director's Comments**

It was reported that it had not been possible to bring a report on the Response to the DfE Regional Director's comments (Agenda Item 6) to the meeting as planned, and so it was proposed that substantive consideration be deferred to the next meeting.

Officers confirmed that work was underway to agree with headteachers how best to use the Council's investment for the current financial year. The one-year nature of the settlement had limited the ability to recruit permanent staff, but officers were working with the DfE Regions Group to explore options.

Members stressed the importance of responding to the serious concerns raised by the DfE Regional Director in a timely manner.

It was noted that there had not been much time between meetings of this committee, due to the previous meeting having been delayed. Also, the SEND Reform Plan had needed to be prioritised due to its pressing deadline. However, assurance was provided that work was ongoing to respond to Dame Kate's letter and a full response would be reported to the next meeting in September.

Members were unhappy with the delay given the importance of the challenge and expressed concern about how this would be perceived by the DfE.

The Executive Portfolio Holder suggested that it would be better to provide a comprehensive response at the next meeting, rather than an incomplete position now, and that officers needed time to complete the work to an appropriate standard.

Reference was made to a recent press release, which had indicated that the attainment issue was fixed/on a sound footing. It was explained that the comments referred to improved results for pupils attaining a 'Good Level of Development'. Also, the school improvement offer had shifted from a bought-in service to a district-wide service with expanded capacity.

The Committee was reminded that Dame Kate had said that the Council's plan was sound, and that the key challenge related to resourcing. Additional resources had since been secured and work was ongoing to determine how these should best be deployed.

Action taken since receipt of the letter included:

- Use of intervention powers in schools;
- Removal of governing bodies where governance and oversight were not strong enough;
- Establishment of interim executive boards at some schools;
- Action to address leadership and outcomes, including the appointment of a new executive head at Kennet Valley Primary School.

The above actions reflected a firmer and more decisive approach to addressing underperformance.

It was noted that changes to the Ofsted regime would pick up on performance concerns, but the Council was proactively seeking to address this. Ofsted colleagues had recognised rapid improvement in schools following intervention.

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The Council was working collaboratively with the DfE Region's Team and schools were being directed to the DfE's RISE programme to access evidence-based improvement support.

The Committee welcomed the actions that had been taken and felt reassured that progress was being made. It was suggested that this be a standing agenda item for future meetings.

It was noted that the performance dashboard would enable regular scrutiny of attainment measures.

**Action: Progress on the response to the DfE Regional Director's letter to be kept under regular review at future meetings.**

### 8 **Draft Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Reform Plan**

Ashley Milum (Service Director – Education and SEND), Anisah Pathan (SEND Strategy Officer) presented the Draft SEND Reform Plan (Agenda Item 7).

During the debate the following points were discussed:

- It was noted that every local authority had to submit a plan with the aim of reaching the same point within three years, regardless of their starting point.
- There was a risk that the DfE could reject the plan, and officers were seeking clarification from DfE about the line that the Council needed to get across.
- Members queried the large increase in the number of Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) applications. It was explained that parents had confidence in the existing process, so there had been a rush of applications ahead of the new system coming into place. It was recognised that conversations were needed with families to explain the changes.
- Funding levels quoted in the presentation were confirmed to be average amounts received by primary and secondary schools in West Berkshire for inclusion measures. Officers considered that there was a mismatch between the level of funding provided and the DfE's ambitions for schools.
- Members asked for further detail around the maturity matrix for the Local Area Partnership. It was confirmed that most aspects were classed as 'emerging'. Areas classed as 'not yet emerging' were around data assurance, including financial forecasting and place planning sufficiency. DfE required quarterly data returns, and work was underway to deliver this.
- Officers explained that 'Best Start' was a national programme to improve accessibility and take-up of early childcare and education, particularly for disadvantaged children, with the aim of achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD) at the end of Reception.
- Further detail was sought about how pressures from the increased demand for EHCP assessments was being managed. Officers recognised that that the challenge, but work was underway to streamline and automate parts of the process, and opportunities were being taken to learn lessons from other councils.
- Members asked about the role of health visitors in early identification of need. It was confirmed that health partners were being engaged through the SEND Area Partnership. The 'Experts at Hand' approach would embed specialist expertise (e.g. occupational therapy, and speech and language therapy) into the local model, though funding only equated to approximately 10 posts. A cluster-based model aligned to the

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Family Hub footprint was being considered to improve joined-up working across Children's Services.

- Concern was expressed about the pace of the reforms and Members asked how well schools were prepared for taking on additional responsibilities. It was explained that engagement with schools had started, with more focused conversations planned from September to clarify what they would be expected to do. It was recognised that changes to practices would be needed given the limited amount of funding available.
- Members expressed frustration that the Committee was unable to scrutinise the plan in detail prior to submission and asked wherever possible that papers should come for scrutiny prior to decisions being taken. It was acknowledged that the timing was not ideal, but work was progressing at pace, and the document was being updated on a daily basis in response to feedback from DfE. Officers indicated that there were other constraints, but these would need to be explained under Part II due to the confidential nature of the material.

**RESOLVED** to note the update.

### 9 School Viability Review

Councillor Heather Codling and Fiona Simmonds (Education Place Planning Team Leader) presented the item on School Viability Review with a focus on Primary School Places (Agenda Item 8).

During the debate, the following points were discussed:

- Members asked if the Council had started looking at the issue early enough. It was explained that 170 school places had already been removed from the over a number of years, but the point had been reached where a strategic approach was required. Various surplus place management tools had been used, and remaining options would involve more difficult decisions. It was becoming challenging to provide high quality education in very small schools. There was a need for robust evidence and consultation prior to any future decisions.
- It was noted that urban areas were the focus for new housing developments and affordable housing, which had a higher proportion of younger families. This explained why the bulk of the surplus in school places was in rural areas.
- It was stressed that a significant amount of new housing would be needed to make a dent in the surplus of school places and counteract the downward trend in the birth rate. Reassurance was provided that officers were taking a cautious approach and that any unforeseen increase in birth rates would take place over a long period of time.
- Members queried why the maps of school planning catchments appeared not to show Purley-on-Thames. Assurance was provided that all schools had been considered and this was an error in the presentation.
- It was noted that there could be significant annual fluctuations in pupil numbers. Officers explained that they looked at trends over three year periods and sought to understand reasons for changes.
- Members supported the 10% target for surplus school places, acknowledging that that this would support parental choice.
- Concern was expressed about local media coverage naming schools at risk of closure. It was felt that this could cause anxiety amongst local families, and that closures would become self-perpetuating by deterring applications. It was suggested

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that councillors had a role in helping to reassure communities that the process was cautious, evidence-based and consultative.

- Members expressed surprise at the surplus of places predicted for Theale given the new development of 400 homes there. It was confirmed that this had been factored into the forecasts.
- In the event of school closures, Members wondered if buildings could be repurposed. Officers indicated that the Assets strand of the GPAW (Growth, Prevention, Assets, and We Can) Boards were considering possible alternative uses, but that in the event of closures, buildings may need to be sold to alleviate financial pressures facing the Council.
- It was noted that schools in Tilehurst attracted significant numbers of pupils from Reading. Officers confirmed that this was factored into forecasts and regular conversations were held with officers in Reading Borough Council.
- Members asked about mixed age classes. It was suggested that these were unpopular with parents and were difficult for teachers to manage, as they needed to design a rolling two year programme of teaching. The review would not comment on the effectiveness of combined classes, but officers undertook to investigate current research in this area.
- It was suggested that other local authorities may already be achieving the optimum surplus of 5% of places, and that West Berkshire Council could learn lessons from them. Officers indicated that conversations had taken place across their networks. Issues were more acute in places such as London, and it was recognised that there may be lessons that could be learned about how they had responded.
- In carrying out the review, it was stressed that officers would seek to understand local needs and the knock-on impacts of any decisions.
- Members indicated that in rural areas, schools could be important community assets and asked what weighting was being given to this aspect. Officers stated that regulations required consideration of community need and they would look at each school individually.

**Action: Officers to look at current research on the effectiveness of combined classes.**

**RESOLVED** to note the report.

### 10 Executive Forward Plan May to August 2026

The Committee considered the Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 9).

It was noted that the following reports were due to come to Executive in September:

- Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report;
- Early Help Response Hub Annual Report;
- Care Leaver Annual Report; and
- The Youth Justice Annual Plan.

Members were invited to identify any items for review; no suggestions were made.

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

The Committee considered the proposed Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee Work Programme (Agenda Item 10).

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Members noted the following changes:

- The response to DfE Regional Director’s letter had been slipped to the September meeting.
- Alternative Provision had been added to the December agenda.
- Home to School Transport had been added to the December agenda.

Members were invited to suggest any further changes; none were proposed.

Officers suggested that the Committee review the Family First programme. It was agreed that this could be scheduled for September.

It was agreed that the Committee should set up a Task and Finish Group to look at provision for young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). The following Members volunteered to be on the Task and Finish Group: Councillors Paul Dick, Owen Jeffery, Clive Taylor, and Martha Vickers.

**Action: Draft terms of reference for the task and finish group for approval at the next meeting.**

## 12 Exclusion of Press and Public

Councillor Dominic Boeck proposed that members of the press and public be excluded from the meeting to allow for further consideration of matters relating to the SEND Reform Plan (Agenda Item 7) as it was likely that there would be disclosure of exempt information of the description contained in the paragraphs of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 specified in brackets in the heading of each item. [Section 10 of Part 10 of the Constitution refers.](#)

The Motion was seconded by Councillor Owen Jeffery. At the vote, the motion was approved.

**RESOLVED** that members of the press and public be excluded from the meeting to allow for further consideration of matters relating to the SEND Reform Plan (Agenda Item 7) on the grounds that it would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as contained in the paragraphs of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, specified in brackets in the heading of each item.

## 13 Draft Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Reform Plan

*(Paragraph 3 – information relating to the financial/business affairs of a particular person)*

The Committee considered exempt material in relation to the Draft SEND Reform Plan.

**RESOLVED** to note the verbal update.

*(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.30 pm)*

**CHAIRMAN** .....

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