

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE  
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
HELD ON 20 MARCH 2024 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.25 PM**

**Committee Members Present**

Councillors: Andrew Mickleburgh (Chair), Jane Ainslie, Ian Pittock, Anne Chadwick, Graham Howe and Andrew Gray

**Committee Member Present Online**

Councillors: Phil Cunnington

**Community Representatives**

Sarah Clarke

**Other Councillors Present**

Councillors: Prue Bray, Catherine Glover and Alistair Neil

**Other Councillors Present Online**

Councillors: Jaquie Rance

**Officers Present**

Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist

Gillian Cole, Service Manager Schools

Lorna Brown, Children's Services Analyst Lead

Adam Davis, Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help

Mark Douglas, Children's Services Quality Assurance Consultant

Oliver Gill, Head of Education Access and Sufficiency

Hayley Rees, Children's Services Strategic Commissioning Manager

Helen Watson, Interim Director of Children's Services

Jonathan Wilding, SEND / Safety Valve Consultant

Ming Zhang, Assistant Director for Education and SEND

**72. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were submitted from Richard Lamey and Councillor Andrew Gray (Councillor Gray was able to join the meeting late).

**73. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 8 January 2024 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

**74. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**75. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited members of the public to submit questions to the appropriate Members.

**75.1 Amit Mehta asked the Chair of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee the following question:**

**Question:**

In absence of any formal process of shortlisting Alternate Provision/Outreach service providers per WBC response to Fol WBCIR:17205 and considering these providers have been working with vulnerable pupils, can you please let me know how does WBC quality assure these providers and what risk assessment is carried out?

**Answer:**

The LA has been prioritising developing a quality assurance Framework for Alternative Provision. The Children's Commissioning Team have developed in partnership with schools a tool kit for monitoring and quality assurance of external Alternative Provision (AP). This toolkit includes:

- **AP Due Diligence Forms** – which collect information on the provider such as qualifications of staff, safeguarding arrangements/policies and DBS checks, professional registrations, service delivery and costs.
- **Contract and Individual Placement Agreement (IPA)** – standard T&Cs for the Council and where applicable in line with the standard National Association of Special Schools contract used for Independent and non maintained special schools. Individual Placement Agreements detail the individual provision and outcomes per learner.
- **Half Termly Monitoring Form** – To record progress against agreed outcomes

Most pupils attending AP remain on the roll of their school and the provision is checked and monitored by the school. This toolkit provides schools a model to use and consistency for providers. This is being piloted by several schools this term as well as by the Local Authority.

Monitoring and quality assurance visits are being conducted by the LA where they are directly commissioning this provision.

The Children's Quality Assurance Board monitors the outcomes and makes recommendations where concerns have been raised and monitors progress.

This will be the precursor to any formal procurement process (for example a preferred provider list or a dynamic purchasing system.) An options appraisal is being developed to inform the way forward and will be presented to DLT for a decision.

**75.2 Sejal Patel has asked the Chair of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee the following question:**

**Question**

What measures does Children Services put in place to prevent abuse of Children Safeguarding Referrals or MASH referral system?

i.e Head Teacher using MASH referral to force attendance despite child suffering from Mental Health.

**Answer**

Wokingham children's services receive referrals where the referrer is concerned about the wellbeing and/or safety of a child. Professional referrers (such as schools, GP's,) are required to obtain the consent of the parent/carer prior to making the referral unless to do so would prejudice the safety of the child.

Wokingham Children's Services have a threshold document that is published on the website which sets out the level of Children's Services response to the need that is presented. This ranges from the provision of advice and information about universally available services, early help and child in need services and specialist services including child protection.

If the information received by the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub indicates the child might benefit from the offer of services, contact is made with the parent/carer to discuss signposting, referring to early help services or further assessment. Parental consent is required to progress any referral, unless the information received indicates that the child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm, attributable to the care they are receiving (eg, neglect, sexual, physical or emotional abuse).

### **Supplementary question**

It was agreed that the supplementary question would be submitted in writing and answered in writing (privately).

### **75.3 Questions submitted by Bruce Winton on behalf of Shinfield Parish Council**

It was explained that the Constitution did not provide for parish councils' questions. The possible inclusion of parish councils' questions in the procedure would be considered by the Constitution Review Working Group at a later stage.

Additionally, some questions referred to part 2 items and would not be discussed in public.

However, the Chairman used its discretion to accept the questions as part of the ongoing conversations between the Local Authority and Shinfield Parish Council in respect of the development of the School Place Planning Strategy. As such, written responses would be provided to Shinfield Parish Council in due course.

### **76. MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

There were no Member questions.

### **77. OFSTED FOCUS VISIT**

Helen Watson, Interim Director of Children's Services informed that the outcome of the Ofsted focused visit to Wokingham Borough Council, which took place on 20 and 21 February 2024, was now available on the website.

This inspection had focussed on arrangements for children in need, including those children who are subject to a child protection plan.

The outcome letter was very positive, which reflected the enormous amount of work undertaken by the service as a whole, as a team. The service had put in place improvement plans to address the points raised by the previous Ofsted inspection, and these efforts had been recognised.

The Committee congratulated the services for its fantastic achievement and wished to thank all those involved in the improvement work undertaken.

Members wished to place on record their gratitude to Helen Watson - her leadership was key to this achievement.

**RESOLVED** That the Children's Services team be thanked for the work undertaken to achieve a positive Ofsted outcome.

## **78. SCHOOL PLACE PLANNING STRATEGY**

Oliver Gill, Head of Education Access and Sufficiency presented the School Place Planning Strategy report and shared a presentation. He was supported by Ming Zhang, Assistant Director for Education and SEND.

This was a five-year (2024-29) high level strategy for the whole borough. It aimed to ensure sufficiency of school places across the borough and control the number of surplus places.

The following points were highlighted during the presentation:

- The strategy covered four phases of education: Early Years, Primary, Secondary and Post-16. It did not address SEND and alternative places, those would be incorporated at a later stage;
- Early Years - there were no concerns about the sufficiency of places. There was currently a shortfall of 26 places which could be managed within the Early Years Strategy;
- Primary school places - the forecast showed falling birth rates, but this was counterbalanced by migration trends. Going forward there was a decline in the need for primary school places;
- There were some anomalies in the system, with surplus and deficit varying in different areas in the borough. For example, there was a deficit of places in the Shinfield area due to the large number of new housing development (a specific proposal for this area was in the strategy);
- Care was being taken to not create permanent solutions for temporary problems. The option of creating bulge classes where needed for a period of time was being considered;
- Secondary school places - agreement was reached with seven secondary schools for expansion of capacity, five of those included funded projects;
- The presentation contained the projected numbers. The low birth rates would filter through, and the forecast was for a number of surplus places by 2029. Consideration would then be given as to how to repurpose the spaces in the future;
- It was positive to note that this year the local authority was able to offer a secondary school place to all those that applied on time;
- Post-16 provision - the strategy was in early stages of development. Three different scenarios were being tested to create additional places;
- It was recognised that the current offer of Post-16 education in Wokingham was very academic. Consideration was being taken to ascertain the local need and quality of the offer in order to develop something meaningful;
- Work would be undertaken to align the mainstream forecasting model to the SEND forecasting model;
- Moving forwards, future iterations of the strategy would include co-production with stakeholders such as schools, pupils and other partners. Consultations were incorporated into the timetable;
- In relation to the Shinfield area - the current number of primary school applications indicated that the deficit would not be as high as previously forecast. There was a current and future forecast of shortfall, but it was necessary to look at the model carefully to ensure that the right amount of places was created. It was important to

avoid a situation where in the future there was an excessive amount of surplus places as this situation would create budget pressures for schools;

- A measured and phased approach was proposed to deal with the increase in demand in the Shinfield area, with the creation of a bulge class and a permanent expansion from September 2026;
- The creation of another school was also being considered and was dependent on further analysis and forecasting of levels of demand;
- It was believed that any capital investments would be paid back with the avoidance of home to school transport costs in the next five years.

During the discussion of the item the following comments were made:

- Councillor Howe was very pleased with the draft proposal, and asked how much engagement there was with academy trusts?
- Oliver Gill explained that the engagement process was ongoing, it was important to find solutions together and look at the situation holistically;
- Ming Zhang informed that the strategy had been presented to the Wokingham Borough Education Partnership and it had also been circulated to all the CEOs of multi academy trusts;
- Councillor Chadwick asked what were the plans to address the shortfall of 26 places for Early Years? It was explained that there were plans for the opening of two nurseries with 30 new places each, there were no concerns that this demand would not be met;
- In response to a question Oliver Gill confirmed that planning developments were taken into account in the forecast projections;
- Sarah Clarke asked when the co-production would start and she also asked how this strategy would interact with the SEND Strategy and how mainstream schools would incorporate expansions and accommodate SEND needs (for example the need for quiet places for one-to-one interventions)?
- Oliver Gill stated that the co-production would start in October/November, it was important to identify the main issues in readiness for those conversations;
- Councillor Cunnington asked if the strategy took into account the fact that often SEND pupils were identified at primary schools and were then planned for at specialist places, this had an impact on the number of places needed at secondary schools;
- Oliver Gill explained that it was important to align specialist places and mainstream places forecasting, the result of this exercise was likely to change the numbers in the forecast;
- It was confirmed that the proposed expansion of St Crispin's School was part to the strategy and forecast;
- Councillor Bray added that the Forest School's change to become a co-educational school was also included in the strategy and forecast, this had reduced the pressure on spaces;
- Members were informed that this year over 90% of parents were offered one of the schools in their preference list, and over 80% received their first preference, this was a much improved position compared to last year;
- Councillor Pittock suggested that consideration be given to the neighbouring authorities strategies, as many Wokingham pupils attended Yateley, Edgbarrow and Farnborough College. Should those schools not be able to offer places to Wokingham pupils, that would have an impact on the demand for places in Wokingham;
- Oliver Gill explained that the projections took into account migration areas in the borough;

- In view of the fact that 1150 new houses were due to be built with the SWSDL, for which a new primary school was being planned but not a secondary school, Councillor Pittock asked if it was appropriate to undertake a review of designated areas?
- Olver Gill agreed that consideration of a review of designated areas was a good idea;
- Councillor Pittock asked if there was still a need for a girls' school in the borough?
- It was explained that the Holt School was an academy and therefore independent of the local authority. Also, parental preference was a strong driver in relation to school places;
- Councillor Glover was in favour of the measures being put in place to address the shortage of primary school places in Shinfield. However, she was concerned about the provision of secondary school places. She believed that building a secondary school at Loddon Vale Garden Village would not solve the shortage in Shinfield, as those places would be filled by pupils from Loddon Vale Garden Village. She added that 160 children were being bused from Shinfield to out of the area schools;
- Olver Gill explained that the strategy was still in draft development, the needs and concerns of the Shinfield parents would be taken into consideration;
- Members asked that future reports include a description of acronyms;
- Councillor Neil asked if the strategy was aligned with the Council's Economic Development strategy?
- Ming Zhang confirmed that discussions were ongoing about developing a Post-16 provision that would fit in with the Council's Economic Development Strategy, in order to develop the skills needed to better serve the local need;
- It was recognised that the SEND Post-16 offer was currently limited and this would be considered in the development of the Post-16 Strategy;
- The Chairman informed that the Youth Council was aware that this strategy was in development and they asked to be involved in the consultation process;
- The Chairman urged Officers to engage with the Planning department during the development of the strategy.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Officers be thanked for their work in the development of the strategy;
- 2) Officers be encouraged to engage with the Planning Department during the development of the strategy; and
- 3) The Committee be presented with future iterations of the report.

**79. SAFETY VALVE & SEND IMPROVEMENT**

Jonathan Wilding, SEND and Safety Valve Consultant addressed the Committee and gave an update on the Safety Valve and SEND Improvement Programme.

The following points were highlighted:

- There was a legal duty to manage the spend on the High Needs Block (HNB) responsibly;
- A series of co-production workshops with Health had been agreed and were taking place in the first quarter of the year;
- The final draft of the SEND Strategy would be presented to the June meeting of the Committee before its submission for the Executive's approval;

- The level of demand for Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) was levelling out in line with projections. However, the spend profile was still not where it needed to be, with a high spend in out of borough placements and alternative provisions;
- It was recognised that there was little intervention in early years, which ended up costing more at a later stage. Although the number of EHCPs was low if compared to other local authorities, they cost more per head of population overall. Work was already under way to address the issue of early intervention and schools were supportive of this change;
- Work was being undertaken to address the issue of inconsistencies in funding in different schools - the banding framework was being reviewed;
- There was a high number of children being supported at mainstream schools.

During the discussion of the item the following comments and questions were made;

- Councillor Chadwick asked for more information about early years support. Jonathan Wilding explained that schools were entitled to up to £6k per SEND pupil to support their needs in the school, any more funding would be met with an EHCP. Some of this support was from Health, such as speech and language therapy – however there was a shortage of supply for some interventions;
- Councillor Howe asked about the funding arrangements with Health. Jonathan Wilding informed that there was a low level of funding from Health, this issue was recognised, and work was being undertaken to address it;
- Sarah Clarke commended the strategy document and asked when would families start to feel the effects of the work? She pointed out that there could be issues that were not related to funding, but related to capacity and the availability of qualified professions;
- Jonathan Wilding agreed that there was a degree of skills shortage. The consistency of ordinarily available offer should soon start to be felt by families;
- Councillor Bray stated that Susan Parsonage, WBC's CEO was negotiating very hard at a high level with the NHS leadership boards to secure better funding for Wokingham. However, it was known that the NHS did not prioritise children's treatment, and this was something that needed to change.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) The update report be noted; and
- 2) Members were supportive of the efforts being made to negotiate better funding from the NHS towards the costs of SEND education.

## **80. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**

The Key Performance Indicator report was presented by Lorna Brown, Children's Services Analyst Lead and Mark Douglas, Children's Services Quality Assurance Consultant.

The Committee looked at each indicator contained in the report and made the following comments:

### Dashboard item 1 – Funded Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP)

- Members asked if it would be possible to include the number of requests for EHCPs per quarter. Officers agreed to provide this information outside of the meeting;
- The report could be improved with the use of words such as: *better/worse/the same* instead of arrows to indicate performance.
- This indicator could also include the number of mediation and tribunals;

- It was agreed that this would be re-visited in the new municipal year;
- The number of out of borough placements had gone up because it had not been possible to meet the needs with local provision. It was explained that some out of borough places were in mainstream schools;
- The number of initial psychological assessments had been delayed due to a high staff turnover in the period, this had caused a dip in the number of EHCPs issued within 20 weeks of the referral. This had now been addressed and was back at 80%.

#### Dashboard item 2 – Early Help

- Members asked what was the reason for the increase in the number of referrals. Officers explained that this was the long term result of Covid, due to increased pressure on families. Also, this increase indicated that the MASH system was working well. Ofsted had endorsed the Early Help service being provided.

#### Dashboard item 8 – Children’s Services Workforce

- Members would like to see the total numbers as well as the percentages to better understand the picture;
- Officers informed that there were generally around 100 social workers in the workforce at any given time. There were around 23 locum workers (some of which had been with the service for a considerable amount of time and this sort of arrangement was preferable to them). There were no unfilled roles;
- The increase in payment brought Wokingham’s payment in line with the South East area. This was helping to attract and retain social workers to Wokingham.

#### **RESOLVED** That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) Improvements will be made to the reporting format to make indicators performance clearer to understand.

#### **81. EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE**

Councillor Prue Bray, Executive Member for Children’s Services explained that most updates were covered within the agenda.

She informed that she had attended the recent Youth Council meeting and been very inspired and energised by the young people’s ideas.

Councillor Bray announced that this was Helen Watson’s last meeting as she was leaving the Council. A new permanent Director for Children’s Services, Emma Cockerell is due to start in April.

Councillor Bray thanked Helen Watson for her work, her leadership was much appreciated and all wished her well in the future.

**RESOLVED** That the Executive Member update be noted.

#### **82. COUNCIL OWNED CHILDREN’S HOMES**

Hayley Rees, Children’s Services Commissioning Manager shared a presentation containing an update on the Council Owned Children’s Homes.

The following points were highlighted:



- A full needs assessment and sufficiency review had been completed last year, which indicated that there was need for the development of more local residential placements for children;
- There were many benefits to having local residential provision in the borough;
- Two properties were purchased in Wokingham, which were now undergoing building work and refurbishment;
- A children's homes manager was appointed and was now overseeing the project;
- There had been much collaboration between different departments within the Council to execute this project;
- The recruitment of staff to work in the children's homes was underway and on track. Much work was being undertaken HR colleagues, as there would be 28 members of staff recruited to work in the two children's homes;
- Plans were in place for the Ofsted application process and a staggered occupation of the children's homes. It was expected that the homes would open in August.

The Chairman informed that he had visited the four bedroom home with the project manager and been very impressed. Members of the Corporate Parenting Board had been invited to visit the homes - he suggested that the CSO&S Members may also like the opportunity to visit some time in the future.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

### **83. EDUCATION UPDATE**

Gillian Cole, Schools Service Manager presented the Education Update report.

The report outlined the national changes to the process of Ofsted inspections, in recognition of the tragic death of local headteacher Ruth Perry. The changes included the Pause Policy (the ability to defer the inspection) and the introduction of a telephone helpline enabling anyone to call and voice any concerns about an ongoing Ofsted inspection. There was also a public consultation -the Big Listen survey being carried out, which was seeking feedback in respect to the work of Ofsted.

The Ofsted outcomes of schools that were inspected since the last meeting of the Committee was listed in the report. It was highlighted that:

- CAMHS Phoenix had achieved an 'Outstanding' result, this was a hospital school, and this was an excellent result;
- Beechwood Primary – the school's result was 'Requires improvement' – the school was previously reported as 'inadequate', so this result was an improvement. They had achieved 3 good judgements out of 5 and were making good progress.

There had been a very successful Racial Equity and Diversity Conference in February, much progress was being made with schools and other stakeholders to embed best practices in relation to diversity and racial equity in the local area. The Executive Member for Children's Services had attended and supported this event.

**RESOLVED** That the Education Update report be noted.

### **84. FORWARD PROGRAMME**

Members were reminded that the Forward Programme is a live document and were encouraged to make suggestions for future meetings.

**RESOLVED** That the Forward Programme report and dates of future meetings be noted.

**85. ACTION TRACKER**

The Action Tracker report was considered, and an update was given in relation to the following actions:

Home to School Transport – Training for escorts and drivers – this work was ongoing.

Complaints Review – it was agreed that a written response would be given to the question asked by Richard Lamey (page 89 of the agenda). It was also agreed that more clarity was needed in relation to the complaints processes for SEND related cases.

SEND Voices confirmed that work was now completed/ underway between SEND Voices and the CTU team to co-produce and improve letters and communications with parents.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

**86. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC**

**RESOLVED** That under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for item 87, on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined by Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of schedule 12A of the Act.

**87. SCHOOLS CAUSING CONCERN – PART 2**

This item was considered in a Part 2 session.