

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 6 SEPTEMBER 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.20 PM**

Committee Members Present

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

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Prue Bray (Executive Member for Children's Services)

Others Present

Rebecca Brooks, Senior Transport Planner

Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist

Gillian Cole, Service Manager, Schools

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

Viki Elliot-King, Assistant Director, Strategic and Operational Delivery

Zoe Storey, School Admissions and Transport Manager

Helen Watson, Director of Children's Services

Jonathan Wilding, SEND and Safety Valve Consultant

Ming Zhang, Assistant Director, Education & SEND

Diocesan Representative

Father Richard Lamey, Church of England Representative

Community Representative

Sarah Clarke, SEND Voices Wokingham

25. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

26. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

A declaration of interest was submitted from Councillor Jane Ainslie on the grounds that she was an adviser to West End Junior School.

27. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 20 June 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair, subject to the addition of Father Richard Lamey in the list of attendees.

28. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

Amit Mehta asked the Chair the following question:

We have been visiting various schools for our 4 year old to understand method and procedure used within schools towards education.

Some of the Schools mentioned as a borough we are looking to move away from Reward System and move towards Therapeutic approach of working/teaching within Borough Primary Schools.

If above is correct, can I please request if there is a General Strategy document which I can access and understand, what does that mean at an execution/operational level or day to day in a school setting ?

Answer

The Government provides guidance for all schools nationally on Behaviour In Schools which can be found at this link : [Behaviour in schools guidance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

It is for each individual school to interpret this guidance at a local level in a meaningful way for the community that they serve and in line with their school ethos, culture and values.

Every school should have its own behaviour policy which is available to parents and carers to help them understand the ways in which the school supports and promotes excellent behaviour in school.

As a Local Authority we do not issue schools in the Borough with a policy directive on the day to day management of pupil behaviour in their schools. This is for each school to decide.

29. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

30. EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE

Councillor Prue Bray addressed the Committee on the following issues:

Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) in schools – Councillor Bray stated that, to date, RAAC had not been detected in any of the Borough's schools. One school required a survey to confirm the position. Surveys would be carried out at all maintained schools by 8 September 2023. Academies had been contacted about the situation and would be submitting information to the DfE. The Council was prepared to support any of the academies on request.

Sarah Clarke enquired about any relevant schools outside of the Borough. Councillor Bray confirmed that the Government list of affected schools did not contain any relevant schools.

Andrew Mickleburgh asked about earlier Government requests for information about schools. Councillor Bray confirmed that surveys had been carried out and responses sent to the DfE on an incremental basis.

Ian Pittock asked if there were any concerns about asbestos in schools. Councillor Bray confirmed that there was a register which detailed instances of asbestos in school buildings. The DfE had indicated that it would pay for measures to address this issue from the capital budget. The concern was whether this would mean a reduction elsewhere in that budget.

Extraordinary Scrutiny meeting on Home to School Transport – Councillor Bray referred to the extraordinary meeting of the Committee, held in August 2023, which scrutinised the draft revised Home to School Transport Policy. The Committee's recommendations had been submitted to the Executive and were agreed, with some improved wording.

Councillor Bray thanked Members for their input which had helped to improve the revised policy.

RESOLVED: That the Executive Member update be noted.

31. SOCIAL WORKER RECRUITMENT & RETENTION UPDATE

The Committee considered a presentation, set out on Agenda pages 33 to 40, which provided an update on the actions taken to improve Children's Social Worker recruitment and retention at the Council.

Children's social workers Rachel Bedford, Daisey May, Jo Salmon and Imogen Wilson attended the meeting to share their experiences and discuss their perspectives on recruitment and retention.

The presentation gave details of the structure of the Children's Services social work team and evidence of the local strategic approach to recruitment and retention. Successes included growing our own social workers, the comprehensive training offer and manageable caseloads (although workload stress was seen as an issue for some staff). The Assessed and Supported Year in Employment Programme was felt to be a particular strength for newly qualified social workers.

Ongoing challenges included the national shortage of experienced social workers (permanent and agency), salary and benefits inflation in response to the shortage and levels of staff sickness. Staff also referred to salaries at WBC compared to neighbouring authorities and the lack of car parking adjacent to the Shute End offices which resulted in time consuming trips to the Carnival Hub car park on a daily basis. Staff also highlighted the limited resources to provide support for families in the Borough.

Viki Elliot-King stated that officers were looking at the development of social work apprenticeships, with potentially four apprenticeships over two years. The development of apprenticeships was supported by the DfE.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the social workers in attendance at the meeting be thanked for their input and Members' appreciation for the efforts and dedication of the social work team be recorded;
- 2) the negative impact on the work and welfare of the team, arising out of the lack of suitable car parking adjacent to the Shute End offices, be highlighted to the Executive;
- 3) Members' concern about the pay disparity between WBC staff and staff at neighbouring authorities be highlighted to the Executive;
- 4) senior officers and the Executive Member be asked to explore options for increasing the level of support provided for families, for example through additional child mentoring and expanded family therapies;
- 5) senior officers and the Executive Member be asked to consider the provision of additional support for care leavers;

- 6) in light of the challenging resource situation facing the Council, partnership working be maximised in order to attract additional resources and support;
- 7) the Committee's support for the development of an apprenticeship scheme for Children's social workers be noted;
- 8) the Committee receive a progress report on these recommendations within 12 months.

32. CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The Committee considered the Children's Services Performance report for Quarter 1 (April to June 2023) as set out on Agenda pages 43 to 56.

Members raised the following points and questions.

Dashboard 1 – Funded Education, Health and Care Plans – 85.5% performance within 20 weeks of referral was good and showed a positive direction of travel. Was this improvement being embedded in the system? It was confirmed that this indicator related to multi-agency work, so it was important to keep building positive partnerships. The SEND team were working closely with finance and data colleagues to assess future demand. This was a key part of the Safety Valve programme. The improvement in issuing EHCPs was linked to early intervention, earlier referrals and earlier identification of needs within schools. Q1 performance was above regional and national averages and population growth – benchmarking data would help to inform the narrative around the performance figures.

Dashboard 2 – Early Help – this item would benefit from more narrative on the outcomes delivered for families – what difference was the service making for families.

Dashboard 3 – Children's Social Care Front Door – again the narrative would benefit from evidence of outcomes and any gaps in the process. Also data on contacts progressed into action.

Dashboard 5 – Children in Care – the number of children in care had fallen from 135 in Q1 2022/23 to 123 in Q1 2023/24.

Dashboard 6 – Care Leavers – it was confirmed that a monthly meeting took place during which every NEET was discussed. Was there anything more that the Council could do to support NEETs into employment? There were a number of factors involved, such as disability, anxiety, young parents, etc. Each case was addressed based on the individual circumstances. The joint housing panel was having a positive effect, but it was recognised that finding suitable placements was increasingly challenging.

Dashboard 8 – Children's Services Workforce – as discussed earlier in the meeting, the permanency of the workforce in Children's Services was crucial and the subject of continuous focus.

RESOLVED: That the Children's Services Performance Report for Q1 2023/24 be noted.

33. HOLIDAY, ACTIVITIES & FOOD PROGRAMME

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 57 to 62, which gave details of the delivery of the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme in the Borough.

The report stated that the programme was a DfE funded initiative which offered free activities and healthy meals to children and young people in receipt of benefits-related free school meals and those on the edge of eligibility, during school holidays.

For 2023/24, the Council received £306k in grant funding to deliver the HAF. The Council had the discretion to use up to 15% of the funding to provide free or subsidised holiday club places for children who were not in receipt of benefits-related free school meals but would benefit from HAF provision. Overall, the number of children accessing the HAF provision was increasing, from 620 in the summer of 2021 to between 1,200 to 1,400 this summer.

The report gave details of the activities offered in the summer of 2023. These included paddleboarding, swimming, tennis, football, archery and art, with “masterchef” and game zone activities. Specialist activities were also provided for children and young people with special needs, including trips to Camp Mohawk and forestry activities. It had become clear to officers that the relationships forged with children and young people, families and partners had the potential to deliver outcomes beyond the original remit of the programme. In order to support future development of the programme new funding sources were being pursued.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and questions.

In terms of inclusion, what level of additional needs were accommodated in the programme? It was confirmed that the needs of children and young people were assessed on an individual basis. Officers worked with schools to identify specific needs.

In relation to the Government grant to support the HAF programme, was this likely to increase in future years? Officers were hopeful that the level of grant would increase but were also mindful of the increasing demand for the programme. Officers stated that the new booking system would provide more data on the level of demand and the number of sessions attended by children and young people. This data could be shared with the Committee.

Was the HAF programme restricted to children and young people in receipt of free school meals – could it be extended to friends of these children and young people? Officers confirmed that the programme was still evolving, so this could be a consideration in future.

The collaboration with Camp Mohawk was welcomed. Would this be a part of a sustainable offer moving forwards? Officers gave details of the day of activities at Camp Mohawk and stated that working in this way with partners provided a win-win situation.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Lisa Hookway and Viki Elliot-King be thanked for attending the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions;
- 2) that the aims of the HAF programme, the local delivery strategy and programme take-up to date be noted;
- 3) the future plans to expand the programme’s reach, impact and links with other Council services, be supported;

- 4) further information on levels of demand, sessions attended and the range of activities provided be circulated to Members.

34. HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT - TRAINING FOR ESCORTS AND DRIVERS

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 63 to 69, which gave details of the training provision for drivers and passenger assistants involved in the Home to School Transport service.

The report stated that, when providing home to school transport, the Council was responsible for making suitable arrangements including employing appropriate transport companies and ensuring that their staff were suitably trained and experienced. Statutory guidance placed a responsibility on the Council to decide on the training to be provided and the best way of delivering it. This included training on issues such as safeguarding, pupil management techniques, challenging behaviour, autism and epilepsy awareness. All training must be refreshed at least every three years.

The report gave details of the training programme delivered and the way in which home to school transport was commissioned and monitored. As part of the continuous improvement process, Members were invited to comment on the current arrangements and make any suggestions for improvement.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points.

What standards were there in place for potential service providers to meet? It was confirmed that providers had to be registered on the Council's procurement system. That required evidence of meeting a number of standards, including health and safety, safeguarding and manual handling, etc. Staff were also required to be trained to handle emergency situations, e.g. medical emergencies.

Did the safeguarding training cover professional boundaries? It was confirmed that the training did cover boundaries. Officers were planning additional training relating to behavioural management techniques. It was suggested that details of incident reports be circulated to Members in order to increase understanding of the day-to-day issues arising.

Sarah Clarke suggested that further consideration be given to the way in which drivers and escorts communicate with families. This was an important element in building confidence and assurance at the start of the relationship.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Rebecca Brooks be thanked for attending the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions;
- 2) the current training provision for drivers and escorts, as set out in the report, be noted;
- 3) Rebecca Brooks meet with Sarah Clarke to discuss ideas for improving the communication between drivers/escorts and families;
- 4) consideration be given to highlighting the importance of effective communication as part of the roll-out of the revised Home to School Transport Policy.

35. POST OFSTED ACTION PLAN

The Committee considered the Post Ofsted Action Plan, set out on Agenda pages 71 to 93, which had been developed following the Ofsted inspection carried out in March 2023 under the Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services Framework (ILACS).

The report stated that the Ofsted inspection report highlighted five core areas for improvement, as follows:

- The timeliness of assessments of children's needs;
- The quality, clarity and timeliness of child-in-need, child protection and pathway plans;
- The quality and impact of frontline supervision and management oversight at all levels;
- The timeliness, accuracy and accessibility of children's records;
- The response to children who were vulnerable to exploitation.

The Post Ofsted Action Plan, appended to the report, set out the key actions that the Children's Services department would be taking in response to Ofsted's findings. Progress was scrutinised via an Improvement Board which met monthly. The Action Plan was submitted to Ofsted in August 2023. It would be the subject of ongoing discussion between the Lead Inspector and senior Council officers.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and questions.

Would the Action Plan be updated to indicate the completion of specific tasks? It was confirmed that completed tasks would be moved to a section at the end of the plan.

In relation to the priority of preventing exploitation, what measures were under consideration? It was confirmed that a specialist post was under consideration. There would also be external audit and tracking of cases in the system and the development of relevant performance indicators.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) officers be thanked for their efforts in developing the Post Ofsted Action Plan;
- 2) the Action Plan be noted and be the subject of further regular updates to the Committee.

36. SCHOOLS UPDATE

The Committee considered the Schools Update report, as set out at Agenda pages 95 to 99, which gave details of schools which had received Ofsted inspection reports since the previous meeting of the Committee.

The report stated that the following schools had newly published Ofsted reports:

- Alder Grove Primary School – rated Good.
- Shinfield St Marys CE Primary School – remains Good.
- Waingels College – remains Good.

The report also stated that, since the reintroduction of school inspections, three of the Borough's outstanding schools had been inspected. Two of the schools had retained their

Outstanding judgement. As of August 2023, seven further outstanding schools were awaiting re-inspection.

RESOLVED: That the Schools Update Report be noted.

37. SAFETY VALVE UPDATE

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 101 to 114, which gave details of progress relating to the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Safety Valve Programme. The report included updates on special free schools, the High Needs Capital Bid and the SEND Strategy Refresh.

The report stated that the DfE was satisfied with progress made under the Safety Valve Programme. The second instalment of Government funding was due in January 2024.

In relation to the SEND Strategy Refresh, the report stated that a SEF working group had been established involving engagement with a wider group of stakeholders. The new SEND Strategy was being developed in conjunction with other key documents including the Autism Strategy. It was noted that the fast pace of the Safety Valve Programme had placed a strain on relationships with the Council's partners.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points.

In relation to the strain on relationships linked to the pace of the Safety Valve Programme, what steps were being taken to rebuild positive partnerships? It was confirmed that there was a commitment to co-production of the SEND Strategy Refresh. This involved working closely with SEND Voices and SEND youth groups. It was confirmed that the draft SEND Strategy Refresh would be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee for scrutiny and comment.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) officers be thanked for their efforts in progressing the Safety Valve Programme and the SEND Strategy Refresh;
- 2) progress on the Safety Valve Programme be noted;
- 3) the draft SEND Strategy Refresh be considered at the next meeting of the Committee.

38. FORWARD PROGRAMME

The Committee considered its forward programme, as set out at Agenda pages 115 to 116.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) two items be added to the Agenda for the next meeting of the Committee on 1 November 2023 – SEND Strategy Refresh and the SEND Voices Annual Survey;
- 2) officers discuss the timing for an item on Early Help Provision with the Chair and Vice-Chair.

39. ACTION TRACKER

The Committee considered the Action Tracker report, set out at Agenda pages 117 to 118.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the Action Tracker be expanded to cover meetings from the past twelve months;
- 2) Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children – Members noted that a letter to the Secretary of State and local MPs, seeking an increase in the grant for UASC care leavers, had been prepared;
- 3) Members be notified of upcoming Virtual School Governing Body meetings and notify Helen Watson if they wish to attend.

40. 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 41, 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.

41. SCHOOLS CAUSING CONCERN – PART 2

This item was considered in a Part 2 session.