

## EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES** of the meeting held on Friday, 28 February 2025 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 1.15 pm

**Present:**

**Voting Members:** Councillor Nigel Simpson - in the Chair  
Councillor Jenny Hannaby  
Councillor Liz Brighthouse OBE  
Councillor Ian Corkin  
Councillor Trish Elphinstone  
Councillor Andy Graham  
Councillor Sally Povolotsky  
Councillor Roz Smith  
Councillor Michael Waine

**Co-opted Members:** Hana G  
Katie N  
Peace Nnaji

**Other Members in Attendance:** Sylvia Buckingham, Co-opted Member of HOSC  
Councillor Kate Gregory, Cabinet member for SEND Improvement  
Councillor Damian Haywood  
Councillor John Howson, Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services  
Councillor Mark Lygo

**Officers and others in attendance:** Stephen Chandler, Executive Director of People and Transformation (Deputy Chief Executive)  
Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services  
Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion  
Maria Bourbon, Oxfordshire CAMHS Service Manager for Oxfordshire University Hospital Foundation Trust  
Steve Crocker, Independent Chair of the SEND Improvement Advisory Board  
Karen Fern, SEND Designated Clinical Officer for BOB ICB  
Jules Francis-Sinclair, Co-Chair of Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum  
Nick Field, Children's Services Operations Manager  
Jean Kelly, Deputy Director Children's Social Care  
Caroline Kelly, Head of Integrated Commissioning – Start Well  
Matthew Tait, Chief Delivery Officer (ICB)  
Chris Wright, Associate Director of Place – Oxfordshire (ICB)  
Stephen Good, Home to School Transport Programme Manager  
Philip Earnshaw, Operational Manager - Contracted and Fleet Services  
Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer

*The Council considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and decided as set out below. Except insofar as otherwise specified, the reasons for the decisions are contained in the agenda and reports, copies of which are attached to the signed Minutes.*

## **1/25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS**

(Agenda No. 1)

The following members of the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee had sent apologies that they were unable to attend for item 8: Cllr Hanna, District Cllr Barrow, District Cllr Poskitt.

## **2/25 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

(Agenda No. 2)

Katie N declared that she had two non-registerable interests, one concerning Home to School Transport, and the other as a member of the SEND Youth Forum.

Sylvia Buckingham declared that she was also a Patient Safety Partner with Oxford University Hospitals, and a Trustee for Healthwatch Oxfordshire.

## **3/25 MINUTES**

(Agenda No. 3)

The minutes for the meeting on the 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2025 were **AGREED** as a true and accurate record.

## **4/25 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS**

(Agenda No. 4)

Cllr Damian Haywood commented on the Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) report, seeking clarity on "incremental progress" and noting the absence of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and dashboards. He highlighted a discrepancy in Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) success rates—100% for some cohorts but only 20% overall—and queried delays. Cllr Haywood emphasised that, whilst the improvement programme benefited SEND children, they were disproportionately affected by failures. He pointed out the lack of targets or metrics in Theme 1 and noted the decline in EHCP completion rates from 40% to 20%.

Katy Bentley attended to share her experiences and challenge claims that only a few parents were affected by changes, arguing many parents and carers felt exhausted and frustrated. She discussed delays and lack of transparency in securing an appropriate placement for her deaf daughter despite clear evidence of her needs, highlighting issues with her daughter's EHCP and a rushed transition to a specialist base after an appeal. Criticising the decision-making process as opaque and complicated, Ms Bentley expressed frustration with inadequate communication from the local authority. She emphasised the negative impact on her family and called for respect, honesty, and transparency in the SEND process, urging the committee to focus on outcomes and ensure the system works effectively for all families.

Melody Drinkwater, representing Oxfordshire SEND Parent Action, criticised the SEND update report for its overly positive tone and lack of detailed KPIs. She noted improvements in response times but highlighted worst-case scenarios and a decline in the completion rate of EHCP within 20 weeks. Ms Drinkwater raised concerns about the quality of EHCPs, with fewer than half rated as good or outstanding, and emphasised the need to measure success by outcomes rather than inputs. She criticised the Council's communication approach and plans for co-production, urging a focus on the impact of actions on children and young people and better engagement with affected families.

Rachel Hornibrook her son, an 11-year-old Year 6 student with medical and physical needs. Despite good academic performance and no behavioural issues, her son had been isolated since August 2024, receiving one-to-one tutoring in a portacabin without social interaction, leading to concerns from tutors and parents about the quality and appropriateness of his education. She reported that a section 47 inquiry remained unanswered. Ms Hornibrook criticised the alternative provision as a form of exclusion and appealed to councillors for intervention to reintegrate her son into mainstream education.

## **5/25 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN** (Agenda No. 5)

The Committee **NOTED** that the Capital Programme report would come to the committee as two reports in March, and that the Committee was obliged to receive the Local Government Ombudsman report and action plan at its first substantive meeting of the municipal year. It was also **NOTED** that while the Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) report not being on the forward plan was an oversight, there was no confirmed date for the item to come back, with the need to ensure it has been done at a suitably high quality level and co-produced. The Committee emphasised the importance of the EOTAS report coming back to scrutiny before it went to cabinet.

With the upcoming election in mind, the Committee highlighted the importance that once a new committee membership was appointed, members should receive a thorough briefing on all matters and data to identify areas for scrutiny.

Members also suggested a list of other potential agenda items they felt it was important for the committee investigate which included:

- Opportunities for Artificial Intelligence in education;
- Children's and adolescents' mental health assessment;
- Educational psychologists;
- Positive activities for young people;
- Teenage pregnancy support;
- Accommodation and youth offending services;
- Leaving care services;
- Healthy school and child protection targets;
- Residential homes;
- Data driven investigation on attendance and exclusion relationships between schools;

- Update on Wood Eaton and other special schools;
- Issues around child protection and pathways developed within institutions;
- Deep dive into young people's transition from education to the workforce, particularly those leaving care and those not going into further education.

Members emphasised the importance of a balanced work plan and the breadth of the Committee's remit.

## **6/25 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER** (Agenda No. 6)

The Committee **NOTED** the action and recommendation tracker.

## **7/25 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS** (Agenda No. 7)

The Committee **NOTED** that there were no Cabinet response expected for this meeting.

## **8/25 LOCAL AREA PARTNERSHIP SEND UPDATE** (Agenda No. 8)

The Committee had invited Cllr Kate Gregory, Cabinet member for SEND Improvement, and Cllr John Howson, Cabinet member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services, to attend to present the report on the Local Area Partnership (LAP) SEND update.

The Committee also welcomed the following to the Committee:

- Lisa Lyons, the Director of Children's Services;
- Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion;
- Matthew Tait, Chief Delivery Officer (Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board);
- Chris Wright, Associate Director of Place – Oxfordshire (Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board);
- Jean Kelly, Deputy Director Children's Social Care;
- Karen Fern, SEND Designated Clinical Officer (Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board);
- Maria Bourbon, Oxfordshire CAMHS Service Manager for Oxfordshire University Hospital Foundation Trust (Oxford University Hospital Foundation Trust);
- Jules Francis-Sinclair, Chair of Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum;
- Caroline Kelly, Head of Integrated Commissioning – Start Well;
- Nick Field, Children's Services Operations Manager;
- Stephen Chandler, Executive Director of People and Transformation (Deputy Chief Executive);
- Steve Crocker, Independent Chair, SEND Improvement and Assurance Board.

Members of the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been invited to attend the meeting of the Committee and to participate in this item, at the discretion of the Chair. Cllr Mark Lygo and Sylvia Buckingham attended and the Chair agreed that Cllr Damian Haywood could participate too. Cllr Hannaby, the Deputy Chair, was also a current member of HOSC.

The Cabinet Member for SEND Improvement thanked the speakers and noted the value of hearing real-life experiences. The focus of the report was on observing the progress made by the LAP in addressing issues identified since the 2023 inspection. The Director of Children's Services provided a strategic overview, recognising the challenges and improvements since the July 2023 inspection, which had identified widespread deficiencies. The Director outlined the complexity of the system and the ongoing efforts to enhance it.

The report documented the progress made, focusing on systemic changes and improvements in timeliness and quality of services. The Director of Children's Services pointed out the significant increase in the number of Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs) over the past 10 years and the commensurate volume of work being managed. The report also acknowledged the need for better communication and transparency with parents and carers.

The possibility of using Artificial Intelligence to speed up diagnostic pathways was raised and the Oxfordshire CAMHS Service Manager and the Associate Director of Place – Oxfordshire (ICB) explained that Oxfordshire had been pioneering in using AI for initial screening of neurodevelopmental pathways, such as autism and ADHD, with an ongoing project with the University of Liverpool. There were, though, questions about appropriateness from a clinical perspective and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Guidance was clear about the importance of who needed to be involved in assessment and what skills that person needed. Practical steps included single assessor models and offering support at the earliest opportunity.

The Children's Services Operations Manager also confirmed that there was ongoing work to improve the IT systems for the EHCP process. This included using an online portal for applications and exploring the functionality for annual reviews and notifications. The aim was to automate certain aspects to make the process more efficient.

*Steve Crocker, Independent Chair of the SEND Improvement Advisory Board, joined the meeting online at this stage.*

Members explored the shortage of educational psychologists and whether, given the shortage, the local authority would accept privately-funded assessments during the Education, Health, and Care Needs Assessment (ECHNA) process. The Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion, and the Independent Chair of the SEND Improvement Advisory Board highlighted efforts to increase recruitment of educational psychologists and the use of paraprofessionals to help manage the workload. Additionally, they mentioned that, whilst private assessments could be utilised, the local authority would still require its own assessments to ensure familiarity and consistency with the school system and local context.

The Independent Chair of the SEND Improvement Advisory Board and Chief Delivery Officer addressed queries from members about data, data quality, understanding baseline KPIs, the source of baseline data, and the challenges in measuring and interpreting KPIs. They acknowledged challenges with data quality, especially real-time data from NHS colleagues partly owing to the repercussions of cyberattacks, and mentioned ongoing efforts to improve it. They explained that baseline data often came from publicly available Department of Education (DfE) statistics and other verified sources.

The Torbay Council's pilot locality model for SEND was raised by the Committee and what level of benchmarking against other authorities was explored.

It was emphasised that benchmarking against other councils was indeed standard practice and performance using publicly available data was regularly considered. Whilst acknowledging that Torbay's locality model might offer valuable insights, it was not directly comparable due to differences in size and context. However, the SIAB Chair and the Director expressed openness to learning from other councils' successful initiatives and incorporating relevant practices where applicable.

Members asked if prioritising Year 6 to Year 7 EHCP transitions affected the timeliness of other plans, which had decreased to 20%. The Independent Chair of the SEND Improvement Advisory Board confirmed that the 100% success rate for arranging these transitions by the deadline did not impact others. It was explained that different teams managed these tasks and a separate plan existed to improve overall timeliness. The drop to 20% was attributed to increased demand and resource limitations.

*The Independent Chair of the SEND Improvement Advisory Board left the meeting at this stage.*

The Committee sought clarification as to why the KPIs for the LAP SEND had not been included in the report, and thus reported to the committee, despite their existence in the improvement board along with other relevant metrics. In response to questions, the Director of Children's Services explained that the KPIs which were routinely reported to the SIAB had not included in the report because some of the data was unverified and required validation. It also lacked detailed analysis and so there was a concern that presenting it without context might have been unhelpful.

Increased funding in the Council's recent budget for SEND allowed the doubling of the number of schools benefiting from enhanced pathways, promoting inclusion in mainstream schools, without top-slicing school budgets. It was emphasised by officers in response to questions that, whilst Oxfordshire had made significant progress, there was still work to be done.

*Stephen Chandler, Executive Director of People and Transformation (Deputy Chief Executive), joined the meeting at this stage.*

The Committee inquired about the removal of the RAG (red, amber, green) rating from the reports. The Director of Children's Services responded that the RAG rating

was removed because it did not effectively convey progress and improvements. The previous RAG-rated reports were challenging to interpret and did not clearly demonstrate the improvements. Instead, a narrative style was adopted to present the information more clearly and to better outline the progress and milestones achieved.

There was a detailed discussion about financial disincentives for schools with many students having EHCPs, specifically regarding Teaching Assistant (TA) workload and pay. The Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion acknowledged these challenges, noting that TA hourly rates were increased in September 2024. The Director of Education and Inclusion mentioned that a 10% increase in funding provided to schools for TAs was intended to help schools cover the costs of TAs, with the aim of eventually reaching the full cost. It was noted that the Council could not directly increase salaries, as this would require national negotiation. It was also explained that the national funding system, including the notional £6,000 school contribution, had not been updated since 2014. Despite these issues, the Council was working within government-set funding regimes to support schools as much as possible.

The Committee was keen to explore further whether those schools with more children with EHCPs were disadvantaged financially.

Members asked about the cost-effectiveness and outcomes of initiatives in the report, and the risks linked to many EHCPs being deemed to have been poorly assessed, including financial and personal risks to the Council and potential judicial reviews. The Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion stated that measuring cost-effectiveness was challenging but noted independent special school places were three times more expensive than state-funded ones, suggesting possible savings.

It was noted that the Council was not currently meeting the 20-week target for EHCP completion but achieved 100% within 30-35 weeks. Risks included judicial reviews and financial costs, however the primary focus was on meeting children's needs promptly.

Members requested specific statistics and milestones related to reducing the 40% to 20% figure for EHCPs, as well as details about the expansion of the assessment team capacity and ongoing monitoring. The Children's Services Operations Manager reported that the assessment team had increased from five to seven permanent roles, with additional support from agency staff. It was mentioned that there had been a 27% increase in EHCP requests compared to the previous year, affecting the timeliness of assessments. However, with the expanded capacity and the addition of 17 new agency educational psychologists, the team had cleared the backlog of assessments. This improvement was expected to positively influence the 20-week completion rate in the upcoming months.

Members asked about the enhanced pathways and whether, within the constrained budget system, money was rationed to be used further down the line. Members also inquired as the impact of services from staff turnover rates in the SEND services. It was confirmed that there was no rationing of money within the constrained budget system, although the Council had to ensure the appropriate use of public resources.

Additionally, that the enhanced pathways aimed to provide early help to reduce long-term costs.

Regarding staff turnover, it was noted that there was significant turnover in the SEND service, particularly among educational psychologists and SEND caseworkers, who could often find higher-paying roles in neighbouring authorities. It was also noted that, whilst CAMHS had faced significant challenges with workforce turnover particularly following the pandemic, progress in reducing vacancies and expanding services had been made.

*Mathew Tait, Chief Delivery Officer (ICB), left the meeting at this stage.*

There was discussion about whether the information included in the report was entirely accurate as it was not recognised by all members. Specific issues raised included whether or not the SEND Youth Forum Seal of Approval had been approved by the Forum. Concern was also raised about how fully the Forum had been able to feed into the work of the SIAB and how future information about the Forum could be improved and approved by the forum members.

The Director of Children's Services responded that the information in the report was accurate, emphasised that the SEND Youth Forum did have a work plan and that it had developed some initiatives. Examples were provided of individual issues raised by the youth forum which had led to actions, including separating out the preparing for adulthood and employment opportunities. It was explained that the seal of approval was based on designs created by members of the forum, but it might have been adjusted for printability. It was confirmed that the SEND Youth Forum had not been sent the Scrutiny report for approval before its submission to the Committee.

The Committee **AGREED** to the following actions:

- The Director of Children's Services would share with the Committee the KPIs reported to the SIAB and the RAG rated Priority Action Plan tracker;
- The Scrutiny Officer was requested to work with the Director of Children's Services to ensure an answer was provided to the Committee's question about inclusive schools and potential financial disadvantage.

The Committee **AGREED** to recommendations under the following headings:

- The Council will publish the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as well as the RAG Rated Priority Action Plan Tracker and ensure they are accessible to the public.
- The Council will set out how the views of the SEND Youth Forum, and its members, will be taken into account and how they will be presented, including any consultation prior to the publication of any reports about the Forum.

*Cllr Povolotsky, Cllr Corkin, and Cllr Lygo left the meeting at this stage.*

*The Committee adjourned at 12:20 and reconvened at 12:33.*



**9/25 REVISED HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT & POST 16 TRAVEL POLICIES FOR CONSULTATION**  
(Agenda No. 9)

Cllr John Howson, Cabinet member for Children, Education and Young People's Services, Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director Education and Inclusion, Stephen Good, Home to School Transport Programme Manager, and Philip Earnshaw, Operational Manager - Contracted and Fleet Services, were invited to present a report on the proposed Home to School Transport policy and the post-16 policy statement that were currently the subject of public consultation.

Stephen Chandler, Executive Director of People and Transformation (Deputy Chief Executive), also attended for this item to support and answer any questions.

Cllr Haywood and Sylvia Buckingham, on behalf of OJHOSC, remained with the committee for this item as guests of the Chair.

The Cabinet member for Children, Education and Young People's Services introduced the report, explaining that the consultation was live and covered revisions to the home to school transport policy and the post-16 travel policy. It was noted that the policies had not been consulted on since 2014. The consultation focused on six areas, including language updates, direct payments to parents, alternative provision, post-16 SEND transport charges, split villages, and the spare seat scheme.

The Home to School Transport Programme Manager provided additional details, mentioning that the consultation had received 492 responses so far and had been well-received in engagement events. They elaborated on the six areas of the consultation, including the refresh of policies, direct travel payments, alternative education provision, and the proposal to introduce post-16 contribution charges. The importance of gathering views and feedback from the consultation was emphasised.

In discussion with the Committee, the following issues were explored:

Members asked about the effectiveness of the engagement methods, including the use of social media and other engagement strategies, and requested details on their implementation and impact. The Home to School Transport Programme Manager responded that the consultation had received 492 responses so far, and the engagement events had been well received. It was mentioned that the Council had directly communicated with current service users and used various methods to promote the consultation. However, the Home to School Transport Programme Manager acknowledged the need to check the effectiveness of these methods and ensure wider distribution, including the use of social media platforms like Instagram.

Members agreed that the Committee should wait for the consultation results before discussing and debating the recommendations in detail, to avoid influencing the outcomes. However, the Committee was content to acknowledge and support the public consultation as recommended by the report.

Members raised a concern about the lack of flexibility in current transport arrangements, citing an example where a parent could drive their child to school for part of the week but not the entire week. Members asked whether individual transport plans could be allowed to cut costs. The Operational Manager acknowledged the rigidity in the current system and mentioned that there was ongoing work to explore more flexible options, such as personal transport budgets and mileage allowances. It was noted that other counties, like Somerset and Wiltshire, were being looked at for best practices in managing personal transport budgets. The Operational Manager agreed that the suggestion of part-week transport arrangements was a good point and would be taken into consideration.

Members requested an update on an initiative, from a previous administration, where special schools managed their own transport, which was setup following a Cabinet Advisory Group (CAG). Members inquired as to whether the initiative had been successful and what had come of the initiative and CAG. However, Officers were unaware of the previous initiative but would endeavour to find out what happened to it.

Members raised the issue of youth consultation for the home to school transport policy, specifically questioning why the Oxfordshire Parent Carer Forum (OxPCF), which did not have a remit for working with young people, was mentioned as conducting targeted events. Members also inquired about the specific Youth Parliaments involved and how they would be engaging in the consultation. The Home to School Transport Programme Manager clarified that OxPCF was involved in pushing the consultation message out to their network, rather than directly engaging with young people. The Home to School Transport Programme Manager mentioned that they had met with the SEND Youth Forum before Christmas 2024 to introduce the policy and consultation.

Members asked what would happen if a school and the council did not agree on the transport arrangements for a young person, and what the implications were for the young person caught in the middle of the disagreement. The Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion, along with the Home to School Transport Programme Manager, explained that while the child was on the school roll, the school was responsible for providing alternative provision. If the child was no longer on the school roll, the responsibility shifted to the local authority. The Council would liaise with the school to ensure the child's needs were met.

Members suggested that the policy should include a clear process for resolving such disagreements to ensure the young person was not adversely affected.

Members were curious about the methods being used to ensure a good response rate from parents and carers of children with special educational needs regarding the home to school transport consultation. They inquired whether any specific strategies were in place to engage with this group, whether social media was being utilised, and whether local parish councils had been involved, in improving consultation engagement.

The Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion, and Home to School Transport Programme Manager explained that all current users of the service were directly

communicated with via email or letter. The survey included questions to identify respondents' roles, such as whether they were parents of children with SEND. Officers added that the majority of parents attending the consultation events were parents of children with EHCPs. Regarding social media, it was mentioned that the consultation message was being shared on various social media platforms, although the specific use of Instagram was not confirmed.

Members raised questions regarding the integration of the home-to-school transport system with public transportation and its digitalisation to enhance efficiency and equity. They proposed aligning the home-to-school transport routes with public transport systems, complemented by digitalisation, to improve coordination and operational efficiency. This approach aimed to address issues such as public transport providers being unaware of the number of student users, which had led to inconsistencies in service availability. Additionally, the significance of training bus drivers to adequately handle the specific needs of students, including those with special educational needs, was emphasised. Such training was essential to improve the safety and quality of the transport services provided to students.

Cllr Graham and Sylvia Buckingham left the meeting at this stage

Members queried the significant budget growth for home to school transport and questioned what had led to such significant increases. The discussion highlighted that the budget for home to school transport had grown significantly due to the increasing demand for services. The high expenses were attributed to the need for specialised transport for students with special educational needs and the overall complexity of managing and coordinating transport services across the county.

The item was concluded with agreement from Members that the results of the home to school transport consultation would be brought back to the committee for further discussion and analysis. This was expected to occur in the July meeting, as it would not be feasible to compile the results by the March meeting. The committee NOTED the progress made so far and emphasised the importance of ensuring wide distribution of the consultation to young people and other stakeholders.

The Committee AGREED to the following actions:

- Officers would discover what happened to the Cabinet Advisory Group and initiative for special schools to manage their own transport and report their findings back to the Committee.
- The Home to School Transport programme Manager committed to checking which specific Youth Parliaments were involved in the consultation and how they would be engaged.
- The Council will engage with Parish Councils to encourage participation with the Home to School Transport consultation as part of the consultation process.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing .....