



EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Friday, 21 November 2025 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 12.34 pm.

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Liz Brighouse OBE - in the Chair
Councillor Andy Graham (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Dr Izzy Creed
Councillor Rebekah Fletcher
Councillor Georgina Heritage
Councillor Johnny Hope-Smith
Councillor Emma Markham
Councillor Toyah Overton
Councillor James Plumb

Co-Opted Members: Peace Nnaji

Other Members in Attendance: Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People

Officers: Lisa Lyons, the Director of Children's Services
Annette Perrington, Interim Deputy Director: Education
Kim Wilson, Assistant Director: Schools and Settings – Standards, Effectiveness, and Performance
Charlotte Davey, Assistant Director – Children's Social Care
Julie McNally, Service Manager: Fostering
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.

53/25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS (Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Katie N.

54/25 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS (Agenda No. 2)

Cllr Markham declared a non-pecuniary interest, in relation to the Fostering item.

55/25 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

The Committee **APPROVED** the minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2025, as a true and accurate record.

56/25 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

(Agenda No. 4)

There were none.

57/25 ATTAINMENT INCLUDING ATTAINMENT GAPS

(Agenda No. 5)

Clr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, Lisa Lyons, the Director of Children's Services, Annette Perrington, Interim Deputy Director: Education, and Kim Wilson, Assistant Director: Schools and Settings – Standards, Effectiveness, and Performance, were invited to present the report and to answer the Committee's questions.

The Assistant Director presented provisional, unvalidated attainment data, explaining that, whilst Oxfordshire's attainment score of 46.2 was marginally above the national average (45.9), progress could not be measured owing to pandemic-related exam cancellations. She noted that white British children in Oxfordshire achieved at or above national levels across key metrics; however, disadvantaged children, particularly disadvantaged white British children, continued to lag behind, widening the attainment gap. The Assistant Director stressed that schools account for only around 20% of children's outcomes, with wider factors such as family health and deprivation having significant effects.

Members engaged in a wide-ranging discussion about the interventions available to support schools with attainment challenges. The Council's approach involved categorising schools by need, with improvement advisers working across more than 130 maintained schools. Those requiring strategic support benefited from tailored interventions, such as lead reviews and strategy meetings, while all schools have access to a school improvement partner. Intensive help was provided for those with greater needs, especially in leadership and governance, and new headteachers received mentoring. Finance and Special Educational Needs (SEN) teams also contributed to the support package. The Committee noted a strong emphasis on early years reading and writing, with ambitious targets to narrow the disadvantage gap, and initiatives like free book distribution to encourage reading.

Collaboration with external organisations was highlighted, particularly the Council's work with the Dolly Parton Foundation and the Welcome project, which addressed both literacy and child health. The conversation reflected on the importance of foundational skills in early reading and writing, recognising that development in these areas extended beyond formal instruction. Some Members voiced concerns about the risks of starting formal literacy too early, especially compared to international practices. The upcoming 2025 curriculum and assessment review was seen as an opportunity to modernise the curriculum, with a renewed focus on the arts.

Creativity and the arts were recognised as vital for child development, and Members considered how multi-agency interventions might reflect the growing emphasis on these areas. Schools would need to adapt to curriculum changes, and collaboration between safeguarding, education, and virtual school teams was seen as essential. The new inspection framework was identified as a key driver for schools to respond to evolving educational priorities.

Ambitious targets for good levels of development among children were discussed, with Oxfordshire aiming for 77.8%, surpassing the national average. The Cabinet Member drew attention to significant inequalities, particularly for children eligible for free school meals, whose development rates lagged behind their peers. He stressed the importance of closing this gap and described ongoing efforts to address disparities through strategic planning and collaboration within the Children's Trust Board.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on attainment scores and progress measurement was another focus. Members noted that a detailed analysis of attainment ranges, including rural and urban splits, would be possible once validated data became available. The reintroduction of progress measures by central government for the academic years 2026/27 and 2027/28 was welcomed, as it would restore the ability to track pupil progress over time.

The Committee also explored whether free school meals were a sufficiently comprehensive marker for disadvantage. Officers explained that eligibility was consistently identified through schools, with an auto-enrolment project underway to ensure uniformity. However, it was recognised that disadvantage extended beyond school criteria, encompassing factors such as home environment, health, and community context. Attendance and registering new arrivals were highlighted as important, alongside the new Ofsted framework's focus on inclusion and supporting the most disadvantaged pupils.

Creating happy, welcoming, and safe school environments was seen as crucial for pupil attainment. Members shared examples of schools excelling in this area and discussed the need to capture and share best practices. The new Ofsted framework's emphasis on inclusion and support for children who find school challenging was welcomed, and councillors were encouraged to engage with their local schools to better understand and support their approaches.

Building relationships with parents and caregivers emerged as another key theme. Strong parental engagement was recognised as essential for children's development, though approaches varied widely between schools. The Families First programme was introduced as an early intervention initiative designed to support parenting and early childhood development, aiming to fill gaps left by previous services and not restricted to any socio-economic group. Members noted a decline in children's school readiness following the pandemic, with issues such as lack of toilet training, basic self-care skills, and independence observed across all socio-economic backgrounds. Families First was seen as a valuable resource for providing information and support to parents, helping them understand what good development looked like and how to foster it at home.

Sharing best practice from other councils with higher attainment was considered important. The Council's approach to reviewing and adopting successful strategies from elsewhere was discussed, whilst also recognising the strengths of local schools, some of which are nationally recognised for behaviour and attendance. Partnerships with academy trusts and the Oxford Education and Inclusion Partnership were highlighted as ways to foster collaboration, share effective approaches, and develop strategies grounded in data, targets, and priorities.

Supporting children who fall behind at key milestones, particularly during transitions such as moving from primary to secondary school, was another area of focus. Schools have adapted their transition processes, sometimes starting support as early as Year 4 or 5, to ensure children begin new schools in a positive environment. Early intervention was emphasised as a means of preventing dips in attainment and to support mental health and well-being, reducing the risk of children developing a negative self-fulfilling prophecy about their academic abilities.

Safeguarding was recognised as a complex issue. Whilst schools were generally safe environments, Members acknowledged that some children do not perceive school as safe owing to bullying or not fitting in. The need for further work on safeguarding and the importance of recognising and addressing these exceptions was emphasised to ensure all children feel secure and supported.

Councillors reflected on the challenges of building relationships with local schools and gaining access, with some finding it difficult to visit schools even as experienced educationalists. Suggestions included providing practical tips or brokered introductions to help councillors connect with schools, similar to arrangements made for MPs. It was proposed that local Councillors should be informed when Cabinet Members or Officers visit schools to foster better engagement. Throughout the discussion, the importance of Councillors understanding their local schools to support children's attainment and well-being was repeatedly emphasised.

Members requested that, once school attainment data was validated, it should be reported back to the Committee, in addition to a private all-member briefing which would include comprehensive school-based data to enable councillors to understand performance in their divisions. The briefing would ideally also cover practical guidance for councillors on engaging with local schools, address the protocol for notifying councillors about school visits by cabinet members and officers, and present updates on the Oxfordshire Education and Inclusion Partnership's strategy. The importance of including safeguarding and curriculum review impacts in future committee discussions was also highlighted.

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

- adapting the protocol so local members are notified when cabinet members and officers visit schools, supporting and working with local schools,
- celebrating successes and sharing best practices across the family of schools
- developing the education and inclusion strategy with a focus on child safeguarding, protection, and the curriculum review.

58/25 VIRTUAL SCHOOL ANNUAL REPORT

(Agenda No. 6)

Clr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, Lisa Lyons, the Director of Children's Services, Charlotte Davey, Assistant Director – Children's Social Care, and Annette Perrington, Interim Deputy Director: Education, were invited to present the report and to answer the Committee's questions.

The Interim Deputy Director presented a retrospective report on the virtual school, reviewing the 2024/25 academic year with a focus on the progress and attainment of children in care and care leavers. She explained that, while the virtual school's remit had expanded to include support for children with social workers and those in kinship care, the report concentrated on its core statutory responsibilities. The main priorities identified were ensuring suitable school placements, improving attendance and reducing absences, supporting educational progress, and encouraging participation in cultural activities.

The Interim Deputy Director highlighted notable improvements, such as a reduction in the time children spent out of school following placement moves and an increase in the number of care leavers progressing to higher education. She reported that attendance rates in both primary and secondary phases were either above or improving on national averages, and that there had been a decrease in persistent absences and suspensions, with only one permanent exclusion recorded during the year.

The Interim Deputy Director emphasised the significance of trauma-informed practice and the ongoing training of designated teachers. While acknowledging the positive direction of travel, she concluded that the identified priorities would remain for the coming year due to persistent challenges.

During the discussion, Members sought clarification on the effectiveness of partnerships supporting the virtual school, requesting examples and information on how their impact was monitored. In response, the Interim Deputy Director explained that the strength of partnerships varied, particularly between in-county and out-of-county placements. She cited strong regional collaboration through the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH), which had proved instrumental in overcoming barriers for children placed outside Oxfordshire, and also referenced close working relationships with health professionals and the Corporate Parenting Board. The Director added that the virtual school maintained robust links with the Youth Offending Partnership Board and provided integrated support, including in-house psychological services, to ensure effective collaboration for vulnerable children.

Further points were raised regarding persistent absences among children supported by the virtual school, with particular interest in the actions that had contributed to reducing these rates and how the Council might further improve to meet the national average. The Interim Deputy Director explained that attendance had been a central focus, with each child's attendance discussed at personal education plan meetings to identify and address barriers. She stressed the importance of targeted, individual interventions, reasonable adjustments, and multi-professional collaboration. The

Director and Assistant Director added that social care teams closely monitored absences on a weekly basis, worked directly with families and carers, and utilised support services to encourage attendance, attributing improvements to this detailed, hands-on approach.

The Committee also explored how the system supported the Council as corporate parent in fulfilling informal parental duties, such as attending parents' evenings and engaging at the school gate. The Director and Assistant Director explained that carers, key workers, and social workers were expected to build close relationships with schools and participate in typical parental activities, thereby helping looked-after children feel included. They described how staff and carers were encouraged to attend events, communicate with teachers, and support children informally, aiming to replicate the experience of children in their birth families as closely as possible.

Concerns were also expressed about internal, informal, and permanent exclusions of children in care. The Director reported that the team regularly engaged with schools to challenge and address practices such as isolation or informal exclusions, ensuring these were not used routinely. She acknowledged that, while some children might require a short break during the school day, persistent informal exclusion was not acceptable. The Interim Deputy Director confirmed that the past year had seen a reduction in absences due to suspensions, with only one permanent exclusion, and that focused work continued to keep children in school through trauma-informed approaches and individual support.

The Committee AGREED to the following recommendations:

- That the Council should continue to work on improving attendance of those who are part of the Virtual School;
- That the Council should continue to highlight the work of the virtual school with governing boards and social workers to ensure they are well informed and engaged in supporting the education of children in care.

The Committee adjourned at 11:31 and reconvened at 11:40.

59/25 FOSTERING

(Agenda No. 7)

Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Charlotte Davey, Assistant Director, and Julie McNally, Service Manager: Fostering, were invited to present the report and to answer the Committee's questions.

The Assistant Director outlined the fostering service's scope, covering mainstream fostering, kinship care, relief carers, and special guardianship assessments. Kinship carers, often relatives or friends, commonly took on care roles unexpectedly. The service saw a reduction in registered foster carers in 2024/25, mainly due to retirements and adoptions. In response, a Fostering Improvement Board was formed to address standards. Persistent challenges remained in recruiting carers for adolescents, sibling groups, and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Recruitment, training, and support had been prioritised, with successes including bringing children formerly placed out of county back to Oxfordshire families.

The Director addressed the specific difficulties faced by the Council in fostering, noting that the county, like others nationally, had experienced a decline in foster carers. Only children with complex needs were entering care, necessitating careful matching. The Council was found to have fewer fostering and residential beds compared to other areas, a situation partly attributed to higher property costs, which made it more difficult to attract independent providers. Nevertheless, the service's offer was described as highly competitive, with remuneration and support packages comparable to those in London, alongside a robust training programme. Additional options included fostering-friendly policies, flexible and respite care, and enhanced support for kinship carers and those under special guardianship orders.

Concerns were raised regarding the fact that nearly twice as many foster carers were leaving the Oxfordshire system as were joining, and the implications this held for future recruitment. The 2024/25 report indicated a high proportion of carers over the age of 50, with many departing for personal reasons such as retirement and financial pressures. Efforts to attract younger carers had been undertaken, including locality campaigns, word-of-mouth referrals, and financial incentives. The appointment of a marketing officer aimed to address the recruitment gap and the shortfall in provision for specific groups.

It was clarified that kinship carers had always existed, but recent government recognition highlighted that their support had been lacking nationally. The Council had responded by establishing a dedicated team for kinship carers, offering bespoke support and matching fostering allowances for those transitioning to permanent arrangements. This initiative had led to a significant increase in special guardianships.

It was explained that "personal circumstances" as a reason for foster carers leaving the service encompassed a wide range of factors, not limited to kinship carers. These included retirement, adoption, and other individual situations. While conversions from kinship to permanent arrangements had not significantly contributed to deregistrations in 2024/25, it was anticipated that this trend might become more apparent in future years as more carers transitioned to permanent roles.

Further clarification was provided regarding the meaning of "standards of care" in relation to foster carer deregistrations. It was emphasised that this term covered various scenarios, such as carers developing health issues, experiencing increased stress, or undergoing significant life changes like divorce or relocation. Such circumstances sometimes led to discussions about whether carers should continue, alter the type of care they provided, or cease fostering, with the child's best interests always being paramount. It was not simply a matter of carers suddenly being deemed unsuitable.

The training and support available for foster carers, particularly in managing children with significant mental health needs, were outlined. Foster carers received trauma-informed training delivered by the clinical team, Attach, and completed skills training addressing the complexities of caring for vulnerable children. Carers were expected

to keep their training up to date and had access to regular newsletters, support groups, one-to-one support, and reflective sessions. The training offer was extended to both in-house and kinship carers.

Carers received regular supervision and reflective sessions with their allocated social worker, and the deregistration process spanned several months, including assessments and panel reviews during which reasons for leaving were discussed. The service maintained ongoing conversations with carers to support them and gather insights, which informed the data on reasons for departure.

In conclusion, the Cabinet Member highlighted ongoing efforts to improve the fostering offer and attract more foster parents. He referenced discussions about introducing a dedicated on-call helpline for foster carers and exploring the ambitious idea of a council tax offer, which would require collaboration with district councils. The importance of councillors acting as advocates for the fostering service was emphasised, with a suggestion that a simple summary of the package be provided to members to enable confident promotion. These steps were intended to strengthen support for carers and enhance recruitment across Oxfordshire.

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

- Committing to fostering friendly Oxfordshire and continuing to work with district councils and other key stakeholders to achieve this
- exploring in more detail the possibility of a council tax-related offer for foster carers.

60/25 CO-OPTEE RECRUITMENT UPDATE

(Agenda No. 8)

The Committee received a report updating them on the co-opted membership. The Committee **NOTED** recommendation 1.1 and **AGREED** to recommendations 1.2 and 1.3.

61/25 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN

(Agenda No. 9)

After initially discussing holding an additional meeting in December 2025, the Committee resolved to add an additional meeting in January 2026 to consider the SEND Local Area Partnership report and the refreshed Priority Action Plan. The Committee agreed that the EOTAS Guidance could also be considered at that meeting.

The Committee also decided that the Oxfordshire Education Inclusion Partnership strategy and related items, such as safeguarding in schools and the curriculum review, could be scheduled for February and March, with flexibility to adjust timings as needed. The policy review was suggested for the summer.

The Committee agreed that the Scrutiny Officer and the Director should discuss practicalities of timings, in consultation with the Chair.

The Committee **AGREED** its forward work programme.

62/25 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER
(Agenda No. 10)

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

63/25 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS
(Agenda No. 11)

The Committee **NOTED** the cabinet responses to the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee reports on School Catering Services and Corporate Cleaning Services, and the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership Annual Report.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing

This page is intentionally left blank