

PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the extraordinary meeting held on Friday, 30 June 2023 commencing at 3.00 pm and finishing at 4.40 pm.

Present:

Members: Councillor Nigel Simpson – in the Chair

Councillor Imade Edosomwan
Councillor Trish Elphinstone
Councillor Andy Graham
Councillor Nick Leverton
Councillor Sally Povolotsky (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Michael Waine
Ruth Bennie
Councillor John Howson
Ruth Bennie (co-opted member)

By Invitation: Cllr Liz Brighthouse, Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services

Officers:

Whole of meeting Anne Coyle, Interim Corporate Director
Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer
Items 1-7 Stephen Chandler, Interim Executive Director

The Scrutiny Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda. Copies of the agenda and reports are attached to the signed Minutes.

21/23 ELECTION OF CHAIR FOR THE 2023-24 COUNCIL YEAR

(Agenda No. 1)

Proposed by Cllr Leverton and seconded by Cllr Waine, the Committee **AGREED** that Cllr Simpson would be Chair for the 2023-24 Council Year.

22/23 ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR FOR THE 2023-24 COUNCIL YEAR

(Agenda No. 2)

Proposed by Cllr Graham and seconded by Cllr Howson, the Committee **AGREED** that Cllr Povolotsky would be Vice-Chair for the 2023-24 Council Year.

23/23 INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME

(Agenda No. 3)

The Chair welcomed members of the Committee as well as residents, the Cabinet member, and officers. He explained that this extraordinary meeting had been called to consider the data recently published by the Department for Education surrounding Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) because it was a subject of such great importance and the Committee needed to receive appropriate assurances.

The Committee noted its dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of the audio equipment for those with hearing impairments and requested that this be raised with those responsible for meeting rooms.

24/23 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 4)

Apologies were received from Cllr Thomas (substitute: Cllr Howson) and from Cllr Walker.

25/23 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS - SEE GUIDANCE NOTE ON THE BACK PAGE

(Agenda No. 5)

None were made.

26/23 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

(Agenda No. 6)

Anna Antell addressed the Committee. Ms Antell reminded the Committee that she had previously addressed it at its meeting in March 2023. She updated members on her grandson's experience and lamented the lack of support she had received. She raised concerns that money paid by the Council to Calcot Services for the provision of her grandson's education should be clawed back and was concerned that the Council was working with the company given the safeguarding issues identified by the BBC Panorama documentary.

The Interim Executive Director expressed sympathy and offered Ms Antell a meeting with the new Deputy Director of Education to review her case.

Melody Drinkwater addressed the Committee and referred to the government data released positioning Oxfordshire County Council as the second worst council for likelihood of meeting the 20-week Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) deadline. She reported concerns and experiences of parents she knew. She raised concerns about the adequacy of Local Authority commissioned Educational Psychologist reports and reminded the Committee that, if a Education and Health Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) report was restricted, vague, and non-specific, the EHCP would also be restricted, vague, and non-specific. She called for the Council to make proper use of expert guidance and to insist on specific recommendations in EHCPs.

27/23 DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION DATA

(Agenda No. 7)

Cllr Brighthouse, Cabinet Member for Children, Education Services, and Young People introduced the report which focused on the timeliness of Education & Health Care Plans (EHCPs) and the poor performance by Oxfordshire County Council. Cllr Brighthouse drew attention to the Health component which meant that the Council necessarily worked in partnership and that there had been challenges for health partners too. Cllr Brighthouse conceded that there had been problems in the time period reviewed and that the Council had not performed well but that improvements had begun. Cllr Brighthouse reminded the Committee that the issue should be seen in the context of the significant funding problems facing local government more broadly. There was a £17m overspend to meet the needs of those with SEND and that was challenging.

The Interim Executive Director accepted that performance had not been acceptable and explained that he could not seek to defend it. However, the Council was committed to improving upon it. The number of plans issued within the 20-week target nationally had been 50.7% in January 2023 whereas in Oxfordshire it had been 4%. As of June 2023, timeliness in Oxfordshire stood at 60.4%. Decisive management action had been taken. There had been no one particular reason for underperformance but it was the result of a number of factors.

The Committee explored the data within the report and established that there had been changes in the process undertaken by the SEND team to improve efficiency. The Committee requested a breakdown of the ongoing £500k investment and how it had been spent and what it was providing. The Committee also requested a detailed report on the changes to the Dedicated Schools Grant recently approved by Cabinet be provided to a subsequent meeting of the Committee by the Interim Corporate Director.

There was a challenge in public sector recruitment and retention generally and that was a particular challenge for social workers in some aspects of children's services. Educational Psychologists were particularly hard to recruit as there were insufficient numbers being trained nationally to meet demand. Some Educational Psychologists preferred to work privately which also affected Local Authority capacity. Whilst the Council could take account of non-Local Authority reports, it was important for parents and carers to engage with the Council before commissioning a private report to ensure that the questions the Council needed answered were addressed.

The Council had started to drive a strong recruitment campaign for social care and there was a workforce development board chaired by the Interim Corporate Director. The Interim Corporate Director assured the Committee that it would receive updates on the board's work.

The Committee requested information on the Liquid Logic case management system implementation and heard that the Council had withheld payment relating to some modules of the system. The Committee requested information on the numbers affected and what number had been remedied. The Interim Executive Director and the Interim Corporate Director were soon to meet the Managing Director to express their concern.

The Committee welcomed the refreshing commitment to openness, transparency, and support from officers. The Committee noted that delivery was beginning to improve and that significant changes had taken place. The Committee regretted that the report before it did not refer to the management changes referred to by the Interim Executive Director and agreed that such changes should be placed in the public domain.

The Committee requested an update on the work of the Independent Education Commission. The possibility of a Children’s Services Sub-Committee was suggested to the Committee as a means of regular and detailed scrutiny of the work towards improvement.

The Committee resolved to **NOTE** the report with further information to follow.

28/23 SEND IMPROVEMENT TASK & FINISH GROUP
(Agenda No. 8)

The Committee considered the terms of reference for the SEND Task and Finish Group and agreed that they should include the subject of sustainability of the improvements. A restructuring of the order of paragraphs was agreed so that aims and objectives preceded the questions the group sought to answer. Timelines were explored, not least given the delay in being able to begin the work of the group. The Committee also sought to ensure the remit of the group included acknowledging any positives identified and the Committee agreed that Cllr Povolotsky should chair the group, subject to the agreement of the group itself.

The Committee also agreed that a simple summary of the terms of reference should be devised to ensure that residents were aware of what the Committee was seeking to undertake.

The Committee was grateful to hear that the Interim Corporate Director welcomed the creation of the group and was committed to working with members so that they could appropriately scrutinise.

The Committee resolved to **APPROVE** the terms of reference and to **DELEGATE** minor editorial amendments to the Scrutiny Officer.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing

