

PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Thursday, 13 July 2023 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 11.30 am

Present:

Members: Councillor Nigel Simpson – in the Chair

Councillor Sally Povolotsky (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Imade Edosomwan
Councillor Trish Elphinstone
Councillor Andy Graham
Councillor Nick Leverton
Councillor Bethia Thomas
Councillor Michael Waine
Ruth Bennie

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

Officers:

Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer
Anne Coyle, Interim Corporate Director for Children's Services
Stephen Chandler, Interim Executive Director: People, Transformation, and Performance
Jean Kelly, Deputy Director for Children's Social Care
Caroline Kelly, Lead Commissioner – Start Well

The Scrutiny Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting [, together with a schedule of addenda tabled at the meeting/the following additional documents:] and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda and reports [agenda, reports and schedule/additional documents] are attached to the signed Minutes.

1/23 INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME
(Agenda No. 1)

The Chair welcomed members and officers to the meeting.

2/23 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS
(Agenda No. 2)

Cllr Walker had submitted his apologies.

3/23 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS - SEE GUIDANCE NOTE ON THE BACK PAGE

(Agenda No. 3)

There were none.

4/23 MINUTES OF 30 MARCH 2023

(Agenda No. 4)

It was requested that it be checked whether Cllr Walker had attended the meeting on 30 March.

An amendment was agreed to 7/22 to include “and all educational data.” The Interim Executive Director: People, Transformation, and Performance, advised the Committee that it would be preferable for the Committee to consider the data in public at the earliest opportunity. The Committee agreed to **DELEGATE** to the working group to make recommendations, in consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair, directly to Cabinet if necessary and that it should report to the Committee as soon as was practicable.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Young People’s Services advised the Committee that, in previous years, verified results data had been considered in an all-member session in January. The Committee agreed that such a member session seminar should also be organised at that point.

An amendment to 8/22 was agreed to include “including the option of a moratorium being considered by the Committee” before “the Committee resolved to **AGREE**” in the second paragraph.

With these amendments, the Committee resolved to **AGREE** the minutes of 30 March 2023.

5/23 MINUTES OF 30 JUNE 2023

(Agenda No. 5)

The Committee resolved to **AGREE** the minutes of 30 June 2023. Arising from its discussion at the extraordinary meeting on 30 June, the Committee resolved to **AGREE** the following recommendation to Cabinet arising from its discussion at its meeting on 30 June 2023:

That the Council, insofar as it can within any potential restrictions relating to confidentiality, provides assurance to local parents and carers that the Council has taken significant steps to address its underperformance around SEND via a press statement detailing the recent changes within Children’s Services.

6/23 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

(Agenda No. 6)

There were none.

7/23 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE PLACEMENT SUFFICIENCY, MARKET MANAGEMENT, AND FOSTERING
(Agenda No. 7)

Cllr Liz Brighthouse, Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services, Stephen Chandler, Interim Executive Director: People, Transformation, and Performance, Anne Coyle, Interim Corporate Director for Children's Services, and Jean Kelly, Deputy Director Children's Social Care, attended the meeting to speak to the report the Committee had requested on children's social care placement sufficiency as well as market management and fostering.

The Interim Corporate Director for Children's Services gave an overview of the report and introduced the Deputy Director Children's Social Care and the Lead Commissioner to the Committee and commended them for their work.

The number of Children We Care For (CWCF) in Oxfordshire had been rising and that corresponded with what had happened in other areas of the country. There were challenges across the system and Oxfordshire had not been immune from them. However, the Committee's attention was drawn to the numbers having reduced and the successful targeting of the service's work.

The report sought to demonstrate that the right strategic and operational approach was in place to ensure that the Council has the right number of CWCF in the right placements at the right time. It reported on the numbers over the past 12 months. There was a project supported by the Department for Education regarding hubs.

The number of children had been rising which corresponded what happened in other areas of the country. There were challenges throughout the system on how children were supported from a partnership perspective but that was strengthening. The Council had been looking very closely at the children it supported ensure that they only became CWCF where that was personally appropriate. The numbers had reduced as a result of purposeful activity.

There had been increased oversight and scrutiny from senior officers to ensure the best child-centred decisions were made. Work was to continue but there was a commitment to consider each child carefully as an individual.

Support for the workforce was key and building its confidence to work best in a child-focused approach was essential.

In discussion with the Committee, the following points were noted:

- That excellent outcomes for children were essential and that the Council needed to ensure that the leadership was supported in the work that was necessary to arrive at those outcomes;
- That the Workforce Development Board was considering the wellness of staff and recognised there was a national challenge around children's social work. It was important to have sensible caseloads for social workers so that effective work was possible. Because of the work undertaken in 2022 to reduce the number of children in the system, the average is approximately 18

or 19 per social worker. Newly qualified social workers have a maximum of 12 and Heads of Service are alerted when a social worker reaches 20 to manage that. Consistent progress had been made in the past 10 months.

- The end of year figures for agency social care staff was 10% which was lower than south-east statistical neighbours. The Council's turnover was 12% compared to an average of 17% and so progress was being made.
- A recruitment campaign was planned but was not yet in a position to be launched. There was a commitment to wanting the right skills for social workers in Oxfordshire and a commitment to 'growing our own'. Agency workers were sometimes necessary for a variety of reasons.
- One member had recently joined the fostering panel. The reintroduction of what had been the corporate parenting panel was welcomed by the Committee.
- Council services had been considered paternalistic, exacerbated by COVID, but partnership with families was important. There were levels of need and intervention and interference were sometimes necessary but not always.
- Unregistered placements for children were present in all local authorities. Last year, there were 15 such in the county with very complex needs, often rooted in trauma. Courageous professional conversations were necessary to deliver placements for some children who were particularly complex to place. That number had reduced to one but had risen slightly again. There was optimism that this would very soon reduce again as those children moved to registered provision. The costs of supporting some of those children was in the region of £30k per week given the complexity of their need and the Interim Corporate Director and her team had been working closely with Health services to ensure effective and efficient partnership.
- The Council had been successful in its bid to purchase four homes, including one or two that would enable staffing ratios to support those unable to live with others. These homes would be provide accommodation for CWCF that was owned by the Council and which the Council would manage.
- The Oxfordshire aspect of the Link Programme, a regional programme covering Oxfordshire, Berkshire, and Buckinghamshire, which had been developed to support young people with a range of needs whom professionals, families, and carers found it difficult to help had been launched.
- The Council was keen to join a regional recruitment campaign for foster carers and had increased its foster care allowances to be more competitive.
- There was a mandatory national transfer scheme which required local authorities to accept children arriving who need placement on a rota basis. Until last year, each local authority had a percentage take linked to the population of the authority. Oxfordshire was currently expected to receive 148 children but had fewer than that. The Council had bespoke supported placements which it was seeking to broaden. A large proportion of those arriving were in their mid- to late-teens which had an impact on the number of care leavers.

The Committee was grateful for the information provided by officers and requested an update to the Committee on the work of Adopt Thames Valley to a future meeting.

The Committee resolved to **NOTE** the report.

8/23 SEND TASK AND FINISH GROUP
(Agenda No. 8)

Cllr Povolotsky advised the Committee that the group had created a Teams channel to enable easy collaboration between its members as they prepared to undertake evidence-gathering over the summer amongst practitioners, parents, and carers.

9/23 ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER
(Agenda No. 9)

The Scrutiny Officer advised the Committee that he would seek to update the action and recommendation tracker as far as possible before the Committee next met.

10/23 WORK PROGRAMME AND CABINET FORWARD PLAN
(Agenda No. 10)

The Committee resolved to **AGREE** the proposed work programme.

11/23 CABINET RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS
(Agenda No. 11)

The Committee resolved to **NOTE** the response from Cabinet to the recommendations in the report of the Home to School Transport Working Group and requested an update on recommendation 5 on whether legal advice had been received and what the outcome had been. The Chair of the Working Group, Cllr Graham, expressed his thanks to the parents who had helped the Council make such significant progress on its journey.

The Committee agreed that it should seek an update on how the scheme was operating on its work programme in January and later in the academic year.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing