

EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Monday, 22 July 2024 commencing at 1.30 pm and finishing at 4.01 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Nigel Simpson - in the Chair

Councillor Jenny Hannaby
Councillor Robin Bennett
Councillor Liz Brighthouse OBE
Councillor Trish Elphinstone
Councillor Roz Smith
Councillor Michael Waine

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor John Howson, Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services

Officers: Stephen Chandler, Executive Director of People and Transformation
Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services
Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education
Philip Earnshaw, Operational Manager (Contracted and Fleet Supported Transport)
Andrew Richards, Operational Manager (Service Planning Supported Transport)
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.

20/24 ELECTION OF CHAIR FOR THE 2024/25 COUNCIL YEAR

(Agenda No. 1)

The Scrutiny Officer invited nominations for Chair of the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2024/25 municipal year. Cllr Waine proposed Cllr Simpson and Cllr Smith seconded the nomination.

With no other nominations and no objections, Cllr Simpson was **ELECTED** Chair for 2024/25.

21/24 ELECTION OF DEPUTY CHAIR FOR THE 2024/25 COUNCIL YEAR

(Agenda No. 2)

Having taken the Chair, Cllr Simpson invited nominations for Deputy Chair of the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2024/25

municipal year. Cllr Smith proposed Cllr Hannaby and Cllr Bennett seconded the nomination.

With no other nominations and no objections, Cllr Hannaby was **ELECTED** Deputy Chair for 2024/25.

22/24 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS (Agenda No. 3)

Apologies were received from Cllr Corkin, Cllr Graham (substituted by Cllr Bennett), and Cllr Povolotsky.

Apologies were also received from co-optees Fraser Long and Toby Long, who attended the meeting virtually as guests on the Chair.

23/24 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS (Agenda No. 4)

There were none.

24/24 MINUTES (Agenda No. 5)

The Committee **AGREED** the minutes of the meeting held on 20 May 2024 as a true and accurate record.

Members requested the following **ACTION** having approved the minutes from the previous meeting:

- Officers work with Members of the Committee reviewing educational data to ensure the information sought by Cllrs Elphinstone and Waine was supplied to the Committee.

25/24 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS (Agenda No. 6)

The Committee heard from four speakers who spoke to the work programme and raised issues related to Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision and home to school transport.

Claire Brenner, representing the Oxfordshire SEND Parent Action Group, asked the Committee to increase its scrutiny of the SEND improvement process and the metrics used to measure it. Additionally, she pointed out the issues with the tribunal process and the slow pace of appeal resolutions. She recommended that the Local Area Partnership begin tracking the number of appeals registered and the time from its registration to the case resolution.

Melody Drinkwater, a parent of a child with SEND, shared her personal experience of the SEND system. She voiced serious reservations regarding the protracted nature of the tribunal proceedings and the harm it had inflicted on her child and others.

Additionally, she articulated the challenges faced while dealing with the SEND framework in Oxfordshire.

Katie Nellist, a young person with SEND, suggested a number of topics for the Committee to consider. She also urged the committee to engage with the Youth Forum to incorporate their advice and recommendations, addressing the issue of lacking young co-optees.

Ella Buckingham spoke about her experience of having been a young person with SEND without education for over a year owing to the Council's failure to provide her with a school place. She urged the committee to review the SEND admissions process, especially for those with a disability, to prevent further cases of discrimination and injustice.

The Chair thanked the speakers for their contributions and assured them that their views would be taken into account when members considered the Committee's work plan.

26/24 HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT (Agenda No. 7)

The Committee had asked for an update on the report from the People Overview & Scrutiny Committee's Home to School Transport Working Group that was presented in March 2023. They also sought information about the broader home to school transport system, including details of the spare seats scheme.

Cllr John Howson, Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services, and Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, and Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education, attended to present the report. Stephen Chandler, Executive Director of People and Transformation, Philip Earnshaw, Operational Manager (Contracted and Fleet Supported Transport), and Andrew Richards, Operational Manager (Service Planning Supported Transport) were invited to attend to answer questions.

The Deputy Director of Education presented the report and provided an overview of the challenges and measures taken regarding home to school transport. The Deputy Director emphasized the need for policy review and the implementation of a transformation programme to address service performance and cost issues.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services provided some additional information on the spare seats scheme and the recent decision by Cabinet to increase the charges by 20% for 2024/25.

The Committee discussed the report and raised the following concerns and suggestions:

- Members raised concerns about the potential for areas of Home to School Transport issue being overlooked as they sat within different service areas of the Council. It was mentioned that the upcoming Cabinet item on sustainable school transport was assigned to the Cabinet member for Transport, Home to School

Transport but this report fell under the purview of the Cabinet member for Children, Education, and Young People Services. Members were concerned that this made the question of funding for Home to School Transport even more complex.

The Operational Manager (Contracted and Fleet Supported Transport) assured the Committee that school transport and public transport teams collaborate closely. Moreover, the optimal outcome would be that investment in school transport also helped to maintain a public bus service. The Deputy Director also made assurances that officers representing the sustainable school strategy will also be on the School Transport Board.

The Committee advocated for a holistic strategy in considering Home to School Transport, which encompassed the expected use of private vehicles. It was essential that approaches to public transport aligned with broader transport and environmental objectives and strategies.

- The Committee enquired about the impact on the budget and quality of service due to targets aiming for a £1.6m cost reduction amidst rising industry costs. The Cabinet Member notified the Committee that a projected budget shortfall existed and initiatives to reduce expenses were being implemented. It was also mentioned that there would be an increase in fees by 20% for the Spare Seats Scheme to compensate for the costs.
- The Committee stressed the need for a school transportation system that served everyone, particularly children from remote rural areas and those who were neurodivergent, SEND, or have EHCPs.

The Cabinet Member clarified that Oxfordshire, like most County Councils, adopted a policy favouring the nearest school, ensuring free transportation for those who chose their closest school which happened to be situated more than three miles away. The Spare Seats scheme, however, did not guarantee a seat for longer than one term. It was important that all schools made sure parents were aware of this when school preference applications were made.

- Members expressed enthusiasm and admiration for the Independent Travel Training scheme and were eager for more details. The Operational Manager for Contracted and Fleet Supported Transport praised the initiative as beneficial for all: youths gained independence, costs were reduced, and bus companies were eager to participate. A team of specialist trainers and managers was set to begin the programme in the next month, with a Council update to follow.

The Executive Director of People and Transformation left the meeting at this stage.

- Officers and members observed the discrepancy between the current £2 public fare for each way and the higher costs linked with the Spare Seats scheme, underscoring the necessity for a closer examination of public transport utilisation within the contexts of school transportation and Spare Seats.

- There were worries about the application of the Home to School Transport policy and its negative impact on deprived regions of the county, as well as the challenges that limited school transport options pose for school attendance in rural or disadvantaged areas. To increase the Spare Seats scheme's accessibility for underprivileged neighbourhoods, members debated the suitability and feasibility of a large one-time payment for all families, proposing alternative payment options.

The Operational Manager (Contracted and Fleet Supported Transport) indicated that adopting alternative payment methods like direct debits was not feasible for administrative reasons at the time. Nonetheless, implementing these methods could be achievable and would represent progress in modernizing the service. The Cabinet Member proposed that such initiatives should be incorporated into efforts to digitize the service by leveraging data and innovative technology to enhance cost efficiency and user experience. Additionally, the Cabinet Member recognized the necessity for improvement regarding the social impact of the service, acknowledging that its practical value currently falls short of reaching the social value benchmark of £250,000.

- The Chair emphasised the need to inform families about Spare Seats availability and other school transport options promptly. It was emphasized that in order for families to arrange transportation for school, they need to be given adequate notice, which may involve starting the tender process earlier to provide them with the opportunity to make informed decisions. The necessity of revising current policy to create a more inclusive School Transport and Spare Seats policy was also highlighted.
- The Committee noted with regret that a number of recommendations made by the Working Group and accepted by Cabinet had not been actioned in a timely manner and were now being considered as part of the transformation work.

The Committee **AGREED** to establish a working group to consider the Spare Seats Scheme. A report would be brought to the Committee in November and members would collaborate with officers beforehand with a view to a new policy being presented to Cabinet.

The Committee requested the following **ACTIONS**:

- Information about the number of families attached to which schools to whom the Council would be unable to offer Spare Seats or alternative arrangements for September 2024.

The Committee resolved to make the following **RECOMMENDATIONS**:

- That the Council should revise its Home to School Transport Policy.

27/24 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER

(Agenda No. 8)

The Committee **NOTED** the progress of previous recommendations and actions arising from previous meetings.

28/24 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN
(Agenda No. 9)

The Committee resolved to **AGREE** the proposed forward work plan, having taken account of the Cabinet Forward Plan and the Budget Management Monitoring Report, subject to taking account of the following.

- The concerns raised by the public speakers were recognized and will be incorporated into the future work plan of the Committee.
- The Committee agreed to the Director of Children’s Services request that, rather than reporting simply on an Update on working arising from the Priority Action Plan, the Committee should receive a comprehensive overview detailing ongoing work related to SEND and children’s services.
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- It was noted that a monthly report on SEND was submitted to informal cabinet, and a detailed report of the progress made over the previous year was scheduled to be presented to the Committee in September.
- The Director of Children’s Services advised the Committee on the challenges encountered in efforts to appoint two young persons as co-optees to the committee. The Director outlined several obstacles that both the Council and potential youth candidates must overcome, such as ensuring safeguarding and representation issues. However, the achievements of the Youth Forum were acknowledged and commended by both the Chair and the Committee.

29/24 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS
(Agenda No. 10)

The Committee **NOTED** the Cabinet response to the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee report on 23 April 2024.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing