

EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Friday, 22 November 2024 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 1.00 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

Other Members in Attendance: Cllr Kate Gregory, Cabinet Member for SEND Improvement
Cllr John Howson, Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services
Councillor Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance

Officers: Stephen Chandler, Executive Director (People)
Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education
Jessie Dobson, Partnership Youth Development Manager
Alex Potts, Lead Officer: Tribunals, Resolutions and Compliance
Joanna Goodey, Education Inclusion Manager
Charlotte Davey, Assistant Director of Provider Services
Teresa Rogers, Head of Service: Adopt Thames Valley
Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Manager
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.

42/24 YOUTH TAKE-OVER DAY

(Agenda No.)

The Chair invited Katie N, as part of the Youth Take-Over Day, to Chair the committee for its first three agenda items.

43/24 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Toby Long.

Cllr Graham and Cllr Waine apologised that they would need to leave the meeting early.

Cllr Kate Gregory, Cabinet Member for SEND Improvement, had apologised that she was unable to attend in person but attended online.

The Director of Children's Services' apologies were noted.

Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, also attended online.

44/24 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

(Agenda No. 2)

There were none.

45/24 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

The Committee **AGREED** the minutes of the 20 September 2024 meeting were a true and accurate record subject to the following amendments:

- The bottom paragraph of page 3 should expand on what was meant by 'enquiries' and whether complaints were included; and
- Under the first bullet point of page 4, the Head of SEND stated they could provide data about numbers, refusals, etc. This should have been recorded as an action.

Upon the conclusion of this item the Chair asked the committee to give their assent for the items undertaken under the guest Chair. The Committee so **ASSENTED**.

46/24 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda No. 4)

Angus Wilkinson voiced concerns about Oxfordshire County Council's approach to Co-production. He noted that the Youth Forum's reporting seemed controlled and lacked genuine input, particularly when its request for representation on the improvement board was ignored. Mr Wilkinson praised the proposal to include two knowledgeable young people in the committee as a positive step but criticised the Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) draft policy for lacking true collaboration, noting a nine-month delay in its development and limited parent and carer involvement.

Kimberly Morgan, a single disabled mother to an 8-year-old son, shared her struggles with Oxfordshire County Council's EOTAS package. Despite having it since June 2024, her son lacked essential resources like textbooks. She had taken legal action due to unsatisfactory education provision. Ms Morgan criticised the decision-making process for rejecting EOTAS without proper consultation, causing delays. She found the proposed EOTAS policy inadequate and non-compliant with the law and urged the Council to consult families directly to improve the policy.

Katie N shared her experiences with the EOTAS package. She criticised the EOTAS policy for excluding young people from its creation and the Council from its outreach events. Miss Ne highlighted issues such as the lack of consultation with children and parents, the need for educational flexibility, and the mandatory inclusion of subjects like Maths and English even when triggering for the individual. She called for the policy to be redone with proper input from young people to better meet their needs.

Claire Brenner, a parent of an EOTAS primary-age child, voiced concerns about the current EOTAS policy and its development. She called for a proper co-production process, noting that the policy wrongly described EOTAS as short-term and reintegrative, akin to alternative provision. Dr Brenner cited a July 2023 Ofsted inspection highlighting undervalued co-production and unheard voices of children and young people. She urged the Council to ensure officers upheld effective co-production due to EOTAS's specialised nature and limited impact on families.

Vicki Selby, with 20 years in education policy, stressed the importance of co-production in developing the EOTAS policy, and noted that, despite her rare level of expertise, she had not been consulted. She saw EOTAS as essential for families facing significant challenges and believed it should address children's emotional, social, and psychological needs. Ms Selby called for a trauma-informed approach, involving diverse practitioners, and ensuring children feel safe and valued. She also emphasised including parents and children in the co-design of EOTAS packages to create effective educational environments.

Jules Francis-Sinclair, representing the Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum (OxPCF), discussed the development of the EOTAS policy. She highlighted a lack of co-production, which caused distress among families. Initially committed to co-production, the Council later drafted the policy internally, frustrating families. Feedback from a September 2024 event emphasised early intervention, personalised pathways, trauma-informed practices, and better communication, but this was not integrated into the policy. Ms Francis-Sinclair urged the local authority to involve families in developing the guidance to meet their needs. OxPCF remained dedicated to advocating for parent carers and sought collaboration for an inclusive EOTAS policy.

47/24 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN

(Agenda No. 5)

Members **AGREED** to include the following items and areas of discussion on future work programmes and forward plans and tasked the Scrutiny Officer to work with the Director and relevant officers to timetable them appropriately:

- Educational data, including inclusion and exclusion data anonymised but broken down by school and, where applicable, by academy trust;
- Co-production;
- The SEND Youth Forum;
- Home to School Transport, including the SEND transport provision;
- The Oxfordshire Residential Care Home strategy;

Members sought to emphasise the expectation that Cabinet Members should attend meetings in person for items for which they are responsible.

Members also requested that external SEND and educational experts be invited to future meetings to provide advice to the Committee.

It was also suggested that the Committee could meet for longer than three hours in order to receive a higher number of reports and that the Scrutiny Officer to explore the potential of extending future meetings to incorporate more items.

48/24 CO-OPTEE RECRUITMENT

(Agenda No. 6)

The Director of Law and Governance had provided the Committee with an update on co-optee recruitment which recommended that the Committee appoint Hana G and Katie N as new co-opted members from February 2025. Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Manager, attended to present the report and explained that interest had been expressed by one parent governor in filling one of the vacant posts. If the expression of interest was taken forward, that parent governor would also join the Committee in February 2025. If more than two applications were received by the deadline (which was the day of the meeting), an election would be arranged.

There was a discussion about including additional co-opted members not legislated by central government. Members were reminded that current roles for Catholic and Church of England representatives and parent governors were enshrined in legislation.

Suggestions included involving educational professionals or university representatives as advisors. Emphasising expertise from universities, especially in SEND and looked-after children, was highlighted as valuable for enhancing the Committee's effectiveness.

The Committee resolved to **AGREE** to the recommendation to note the progress and to **APPOINT** Katie N and Hana G as co-opted young people members, subject to completion of the necessary formalities for two years from the Committee's February 2025 meeting.

49/24 ANNUAL REPORT ON HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES AND FOOD PROGRAMME

(Agenda No. 7)

Cllr John Howson, Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services, Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education, and Jessie Dobson, Partnership Youth Development Manager, who joined online, were invited to present the Annual Report on Holiday Activities and Food Programme. Stephen Chandler, Executive Director (People), also attended to support officers and answer Member questions.

The Cabinet Member reported on the Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF), a national grant-funded initiative since 2022, which aided children eligible for free school meals during holidays. Challenges included improving booking systems,

ensuring attendance, addressing special needs, and better school-to-parent communication. The Deputy Director of Education highlighted the programme's support during the cost-of-living crisis and urged registration for means-tested free school meals.

Members enquired about the promotion of the HAF programme outside of schools to increase awareness. They questioned whether social media was being utilised effectively to reach adolescents.

Efforts to raise awareness included collaborating with district colleagues to inform local teams and workers who have relationships with young people. Information was shared in food banks, GP surgeries, and youth clubs. The targeted youth support service connected with young people in their communities. Detached youth work directly engaged with young people on the streets. The programme involved young people by partnering with schools to create a HAF ambassador programme, offering leadership opportunities and improving participation. The youth service conducted local outreach to understand desired activities from young people.

Additionally, digital channels such as the OxMe website and various social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, were used to engage with young people directly.

Members discussed the 114 young people who attended HAF activities over Easter, each participating in four sessions. A detailed demographic breakdown was to be provided later following the meeting. Councillors were encouraged to promote the programme in their communities to boost awareness and participation.

To ensure access, especially in rural areas, minibus shuttles, workers picking up children individually, and potential use of school sites were all being considered. Other settings like village halls were also seen as a potential setting to offer a welcoming environment for children, including those with SEND. Fuel vouchers were also being explored to assist families with transportation costs. It was hoped that these measures would reduce the number of cancellations as well as boosting uptake of the HAF.

A targeted programme was starting the following week to improve uptake among vulnerable groups, including SEND children and those on child protection plans. This involved working with internal teams and social workers to identify and support eligible children. Social workers were notified of specific children to engage families and increase programme participation.

Feedback from parents of SEND children highlighted unpredictability in provision days as a barrier. Efforts were underway to enhance specialist provision and make all offers more inclusive. The programme aimed to offer various options for SEND children to choose activities that suited their needs and preferences.

The Committee **AGREED** on the following action:

- The Partnership Youth Development Officer would share with Members a breakdown of the data showing the users and providers of the service, and the

schools which took part in the scheme. The officer would also provide the data for the sessions being missed.

The Committee made no formal recommendation to the Cabinet and **NOTED** the report.

50/24 DRAFT EDUCATION OTHERWISE THAN AT SCHOOL POLICY (Agenda No. 8)

Cllr John Howson, Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Young People's Services, and Cllr Kate Gregory, Cabinet Member for SEND Improvement, were invited to present a report on the on the Draft Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) Policy. Stephen Chandler, Executive Director (People), Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education, Alex Potts, Lead Officer: Tribunals, Resolutions and Compliance, and Joanna Goodey, Education Inclusion Manager, also attended and answered the Committee's questions.

The Cabinet Member for SEND Improvement began by acknowledging the need to engage more with parents and carers before the policy was subsequently submitted to Cabinet. Cllr Gregory explained that it had been hoped to defer the report once the level of dissatisfaction had been registered.

The Deputy Director of Education apologised for the length of time it had taken to develop the policy and the distress it had caused. The Deputy Director confirmed that the intention was to work with the co-production team to look again at the draft policy as well as the accompanying guidance before it moved on.

The Education Inclusion Manager thanked parents and carers for their very valuable feedback and would review the content of the letter submitted by them to members of the Committee. A meeting with the SEND Youth Forum was also announced, with the intention of working with them and other stakeholders to co-produce the information and guidance accompanying the future EOTAS policy.

The number of children and families receiving EOTAS had increased from 42 to 52, highlighting the need for a clear policy detailing responsibilities and processes. A workday was scheduled on 13 January 2025 to address personal budgets, safeguarding, coordination, monitoring, and training.

The Committee was assured that there was a strong commitment on the Council's part to develop a policy that families currently receiving EOTAS were content with but one that was sustainable and appropriate for the future too.

Members of the Committee emphasised the importance of coproduction but also clarity and communication so that all stakeholders understood the constraints, legal and financial, under which the Council was operating. .

Members began by asking the representative of OxPCF a number of questions about their engagement with the policy drafting process. In relation to co-production at the beginning of the process OxPCF suggested they had participated in the process but there remained a lack of understanding about what co-production was. Oxfordshire

was rightly regarded as very good at participation and engagement, which was very positive, but this was not co-production. OxPCF suggested that a decision had been made by the Council to not co-produce the policy which had left families frustrated. It was felt that the draft EOTAS policy featured lots of guidance, rather than legal policy, and that could have been easily co-produced.

Members inquired about the frequency of consultations with service providers and professionals supporting the 52 EOTAS families during the policy drafting process. Officers indicated that these providers and professionals were not specifically consulted initially. The primary aim was to draft a policy for the Council, with plans to involve the providers later when commissioning services. It was noted that if Scrutiny recommended involving providers in shaping the policy, the Council would consider this approach.

Officers updated members on Alternative Provision (AP) and EOTAS from the Department of Education's (DfE) national consultation. The update mentioned a national database and inspection regime for EOTAS providers. All alternative providers were expected to undergo local quality assurance and due diligence checks. The DfE considered the AP market complex and emphasised that local bodies should ensure thorough quality and insurance checks. Public bodies were already managing essential safeguards like due diligence and public liability insurance effectively.

Committee Members once again emphasised the desire for greater co-production and collaboration, and to learn rapidly from previous mistakes made in relation to the EOTAS policy. Officers and Cabinet Members were encouraged to read, and engage with the signatories of, the letter submitted by parents and young people in receipt of EOTAS packages. Cabinet was urged to ensure this item was a priority and that the Cabinet Member for SEND Improvement and officers had Cabinet's support.

The Oxfordshire Way and adult social services were highlighted as examples of positive co-production work. Members emphasised that the adult social care sector in Oxfordshire had some of the most effective and highly-regarded co-production in the country and suggested that similar approaches should be used for children's services.

Officers and the Cabinet Member for SEND Improvement welcomed the constructive criticism of the Committee and expressed their desire to co-produce the guidance associated with the EOTAS policy with parents and young people. The Executive Director (People) mentioned that a member of the SEND Parent Action Group was now the co-chair of the council's co-production board. This was highlighted as a starting point for ensuring meaningful engagement with families in the co-production process.

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

- That the Council should develop a new Alternative Provision policy and EOTAS policy written in conjunction with each other in a co-produced way.

- That the draft EOTAS policy should be re-developed using co-production and external experts and that this should be done swiftly and should be considered by the Committee before it is submitted to Cabinet.

51/24 REVISED HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT POLICY FOR CONSULTATION

(Agenda No. 9)

As the report had not been received, the Committee **AGREED** to defer this item and that an additional meeting in January 2025 should be arranged.

52/24 ANNUAL REPORT FROM ADOPT THAMES VALLEY

(Agenda No. 10)

Cllr John Howson, Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Young People's Services, Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education, Charlotte Davey, Assistant Director of Provider Services, and Teresa Rogers, Head of Service: Adopt Thames Valley, were invited to present the Annual Report from Adopt Thames Valley.

The Scrutiny Officer advised the Committee that there was no need to go into private session as long as the Committee's questions remained general. No cover report to the Committee had been provided and the annual report had been published as exempt. A supplement had been published which contained information that was not exempt from disclosure.

The Head of Service: Adopt Thames Valley outlined the agency's work across multiple authorities in the region. It managed recruitment, assessment, approval of adopters, non-agency adoptions, family finding, and post-adoption support. The agency also aided special guardianship families, indirect letterbox contact, birth relatives, and adopted adults seeking records. The service contracted with Korum IAC for intercounty adoption services due to its complexity.

Members started by seeking clarification about the difference between adoption and non-agency adoption. The Head of Service explained that the number of children adopted in a year refers to children who were previously looked after and were now adopted. Non-agency adoption orders mainly involved step-parent adoptions or cases where a foster carer who had a child living with them long-term decided to adopt that child.

Members noted the high number of adopter withdrawals in 2023/24 and questioned the causes. Officers explained that delays in care proceedings due to the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased strain and unpredictability, causing some adopters to withdraw. Additionally, a lack of government funding left many potential adopters feeling unable to provide necessary care and stability.

The most significant reason behind the withdrawals was a surplus in adopters. It was suggested that, a few years ago, there was a surplus of adopters, with around three adoptive families for every child needing adoption. This led to long waiting periods and disheartening experiences for adopters who were not selected, contributing to withdrawals.

Members inquired about the target audience of the adoption service and their efforts to attract potential adopters.

The service welcomed applicants from all backgrounds, including single individuals. They focused on inclusivity and encouraged those with challenging pasts to apply, provided they have the qualities needed to parent a child and commit long-term. Efforts to debunk myths about who could adopt, supported by a national campaign, had increased the number of applicants, especially among single people.

The length of the adoption process was explained, with a statutory timescale for adoption as six months, with the first two months dedicated to statutory checks (employer checks, family and friends' references, school references, medicals, local authority references). This could sometimes take longer due to delays in medical checks. The following four months involved a detailed assessment process where a worker meets with the family to get to know them. Additionally, the complexity of the families and the concurrent court proceedings for the child could also extend the overall process.

The Committee made no formal recommendation to the Cabinet and **NOTED** the report.

ACTION: In discussion before item 10 formally opened, members of the Committee **AGREED** that members would receive information explaining the confusion that had arisen around papers for items 10 and 11.

53/24 ANNUAL CORPORATE PARENTING REPORT
(Agenda No. 11)

The Committee **AGREED** to defer this item, owing to the lateness of the correct report.

54/24 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER
(Agenda No. 12)

The Action and Recommendation tracker was **NOTED** by the committee with a request for an update on the outworking of the Education Commission report

The Scrutiny Officer and Executive Director (People) also reminded the Committee of the formal response to the recommendation of embedding committee members into the SEND Improvement Board's task and finish groups.

55/24 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS
(Agenda No. 13)

There were none.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing