



EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Friday, 11 July 2025 commencing at 10.03 am and finishing at 12.29 pm.

Present:

Voting Members:

Councillor Liz Brighthouse OBE - in the Chair
Councillor Rebekah Fletcher
Councillor Georgina Heritage
Councillor Johnny Hope-Smith
Councillor Emma Markham
Councillor James Plumb
Councillor John Shiri

Co-Optee Members:

Katie N

**Other Members in
Attendance:**

Cllr Dr Izzy Creed (virtually)
Peace Nnaji (virtually)
Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People;
Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet member for Finance, Property, and Transformation

Officers:

Lorna Baxter, Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer
Stephen Chandler, Executive Director of People
Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property and Assets
Anthony Hulsman, Head of Property Operations
Charlotte Davey, Assistant Director for County Services;
Delia Mann, Assistant Director of Early Help & Prevention;
Senay Nidai, Assistant Director for Safeguarding;
Deborah Smit, Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion;
Kim Wilson, Assistant Director for Schools and Settings - Standards, Effectiveness and Performance
Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer
Ben Piper, Democratic Services 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.

34/25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Graham, Cllr Overton (substitute: Cllr Fletcher), and from co-optees, Hana G and Toby Long.

Apologies were also received from Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion, and Jean Kelly, Deputy Director of Children's Social Care.

Cllr Dr Izzy Creed and co-optee Peace Nnaji attended virtually with the consent of the Chair.

35/25 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

(Agenda No. 2)

There were none.

36/25 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

Subject to correcting the typographical error on page 2 ('draught' to become 'draft'), substituting 'declined to do so at this stage' for 'decided against' in the tenth paragraph of agenda item No. 8, and inserting 'now' between 'Council' and 'conducted' at in the ninth paragraph of agenda item No.8, the Committee **AGREED** the minutes for the 13 June 2025 meeting as an accurate record.

Under matters arising, a question was raised as to whether the EOTAS parent-carer guidance would return to the Committee in accordance with the Committee's recommendation given that it was currently on the Cabinet agenda for approval at its meeting on 15 July 2025. Later in the course of the meeting, the Cabinet member for Children and Young People stated that it had been erroneously submitted and that an amended recommendation would be moved by Cabinet.

37/25 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

(Agenda No. 4)

There were none.

38/25 SCHOOL CATERING SERVICE - PROPOSED CHANGE OF PROVISION FOR SCHOOLS

(Agenda No. 5)

39/25 CORPORATE CLEANING SERVICE - PROPOSED OUT-SOURCE OF IN-HOUSE CLEANING SERVICE

(Agenda No. 6)

The Chair stated that items 5 and 6 would be grouped, with reports introduced and discussed separately, since both required parts to be addressed in a private session.

The Committee invited Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation, and Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet Member Children and Young People, Stephen Chandler, Executive Director of People,, Lorna Baxter, Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer, Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property and Assets, and Anthony Hulsman, Head of Property Operations, were invited to present a report on proposals for the Council's school catering service and one on the corporate cleaning service.

The Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation introduced the items and mentioned the need to discuss these items in a private session owing to commercial sensitivities. The focus was on making efficiencies for financial reasons, ensuring fairness to those involved, and maintaining service quality.

The Director of Property and Assets provided a short presentation on School Catering Services and explained the background and reasons for the proposed changes in the catering services. He highlighted that the current delivery model was not financially sustainable, even after implementing several efficiencies. The service could not break even owing to insufficient volume and the need to increase meal prices to an unreasonable level. The Council needed to consider alternative solutions.

Members asked about competitors and it was established that the main competitor was the Oxford Lunch Company, which had been bought out, although there were several other competitors.

The number of rural schools serviced was highlighted, with a focus on small village schools that could not sustain on-site catering facilities. The implications of contracting out services for these rural schools were discussed, emphasising the need to support them through delivery services.

Members were keen to confirm that the quality of food would be guaranteed by engaging leading catering services that adhere to the same standards of quality and nutrition. The Committee was given that assurance.

The Director of Property and Assets provided a short presentation on the Corporate Cleaning Service. He explained that the Council had previously outsourced 50% of its cleaning services, which had resulted in significant savings and maintained high service quality. The proposal was to extend this outsourcing to the remaining cleaning services, including several schools, to further reduce costs and improve efficiency.

Following the overview of corporate cleaning services, it was confirmed that several schools would be affected by the proposed contract and that a number of these schools were small rural schools.

After the introductions, the Committee resolved to exclude the public for the duration of the items under discussion as the information provided in Annex 1 to each report were deemed to contain exempt information and the public interest was weighted in favour of considering the information in private as the information related to a current commercial negotiation.

In discussion about the School Catering Service, the Committee explored the following areas:

- It was confirmed that there would be no redundancies, as all staff would be transferred under Transfer of Undertaking (Protection of Employment) (TUPE) regulations, with their terms and conditions maintained.
- Due diligence to consider local partners. It was explained that the focus was on finding specialised catering organisations with the same values and principles. It was noted that some local providers were identified, and the preferred direction was to keep the business within Oxfordshire.
- It was confirmed that diversifying the catering contract into other areas such as adult social care was explored, but it was determined that the risks and benefits did not justify the expansion. The focus remained on improving the current school catering service.
- It was confirmed that the impact of rising free school meal eligibility without a commensurate increase in Government reimbursement posed a significant risk to the business, as the number of children eligible for free school meals was expected to continue to grow. This would strain the budget further.

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People indicated that the Schools Forum appreciated the economic rationale for outsourcing catering and cleaning services. While some concerns were expressed, especially in relation to rural schools, the necessity of the proposed measures was recognised.

The Committee resolved to **NOTE** the report and members were content for officers to use their judgment and due diligence when it came to deciding which of the options proposed in the report should be recommended to Cabinet.

The Committee then focused on Corporate Cleaning Service outsourcing. The Director of Property and Assets reported that initially outsourcing 50% of services had saved costs while maintaining quality. A proposal was made to extend outsourcing to all cleaning services, including seven schools, aiming for further savings and operational efficiency. The Council sought to reduce financial exposure, keep two area managers for contract oversight, and build on the previous successful transfer to Parkers.

Under the previous arrangement, all staff had been transferred to the new provider, with only one redundancy. The Head of Property Operations noted proactive union engagement to protect staff terms, conditions, and pensions, all honoured by the provider through a pass-through contract.

The Committee explored the following in discussion:

- It was confirmed that the contract would affect seven schools and various corporate sites, including County Hall and other council facilities within the city.

- It was confirmed that all staff members would be transferred under TUPE regulations, ensuring their terms and conditions, including pensions, were protected.

The possibility of future redundancies was acknowledged but the primary goal was to protect staff and to maintain their employment terms. Additionally, it was emphasised that vulnerable workers would be protected, and the new contracts would ensure that their needs were considered and supported.

- Whether retaining only two Area Managers and part funding the Operational Manager was sufficient. It was explained that two Area Managers would be retained to manage the contracts and ensure service quality. This decision was made after assessing the workload and engaging with the area managers, who confirmed that they could effectively manage the contracts with the adjusted responsibilities.
- Trade union engagement and communication with directly affected staff. It was explained that the unions would be engaged once approval was received, and all documentation would be shared with them.

The unions had been involved in the previous tender process, ensuring terms and conditions, including pensions, were protected. The intention was to replicate this process, ensuring the chosen provider recognised unions. Communication with staff would include informing them of the situation, their rights under TUPE, and offering support through well-being services and direct engagement opportunities.

The Committee **AGREED** to make recommendations to Cabinet relating to both reports under the following headings:

- That the Council should work to ensure that rural schools are protected and receive high quality catering services.
- That the Council should ensure that the rights of existing staff members will be protected, and that trade unions will be consulted and engaged throughout the process.

The Committee resolved to end the exclusion of the public and to return to public session.

40/25 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN (Agenda No. 7)

In order to inform its work planning, the Committee had invited officers from across Children's Services to advise and invited the Cabinet member for Children and Young People and the Cabinet member for Finance to take part in the discussion. The following officers attended

- Stephen Chandler, Executive Director for People;
- Charlotte Davey, Assistant Director for County Services;
- Delia Mann, Assistant Director of Early Help & Prevention;
- Senay Nidai, Assistant Director Safeguarding;

- Deborah Smit, Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion;
- Kim Wilson, Assistant Director for Schools and Settings - Standards, Effectiveness and Performance.

The Chair opened by stressing the need to prioritise children in the Council's plans, given the 150,000 children and young people in Oxfordshire. The Committee had requested a comprehensive data pack, setting out information relating to children's social care and to education, and the Chair recommended a structured review of the data to clearly understand what it shows about this group.

The Assistant Directors were invited to give an overview of key points relating to their respective service area.

The new Assistant Director for Schools and Settings stressed the need to improve literacy and numeracy in primary schools, particularly for vulnerable groups such as white British boys on free school meals and she announced an upcoming year-long reading initiative.

The Assistant Director of Early Help & Prevention highlighted attendance as key, especially for children under child protection plans, and called for joint work between social care and education. She reported a 17% drop in child protection plans and a 5% reduction in children in need plans, crediting multi-agency collaboration, whilst noting stable demand at the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub.

The Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion noted that the number of Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs) had risen above national averages, with over 8,000 expected in Oxfordshire, and stressed the importance of early interventions like special school outreach and SENCO support to improve outcomes.

The Assistant Director for County Services emphasised reducing out-of-county placements and increasing local foster carers, given a national decline of 4,000 Council carers. The steady number of children in care and fewer child protection plans signalled successful prevention.

The Assistant Director Safeguarding echoed the need to improve attendance for vulnerable children, starting in nurseries, and underscored the value of early help strategies to prevent statutory interventions by identifying needs sooner.

Members noted that the data relating to complaints to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman did not set out clearly that, of the complaints investigated, all had been upheld. The Executive Director of People committed to feeding back to the committee full data of complaints and compliments the council received.

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People mentioned that the Independent Chair of the SEND Improvement Assurance Board, had been taken aback by the disproportionality in the percentage of school-age children with SEND support in Oxfordshire. This highlighted a significant concern regarding the higher number of children requiring SEND support in Oxfordshire.

The Committee discussed attendance; Local Authority influence with academy schools; the School Improvement team; Multi Agency Safeguarding Hubs; Education and Health Care Needs Assessments and Education and Health Care Plans; early intervention and SEND Support. The number of children in care not in education, employment or training was discussed as was the need for more foster carers. Trauma-informed education, attainment, and co-production were also discussed. Early years and Best Start centres were raised too.

The Committee agreed to delegate to the Scrutiny Officer, in consultation with the Chair, the drawing up of a provisional work programme. The Committee **AGREED** to receive the Youth Justice Annual Statement and the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report at its meeting on 26 September.

During the course of the municipal year, the Committee anticipated scrutinising:

- SEND, recognising the potential impact of a new White Paper, including SEND Support and the graduated approach;
- Co-production in Children's Services: how is this embedded across service areas;
- Fostering;
- Attainment including attainment gaps;
- Educational Data (once validated)
- Attendance
- Early Years

The Committee also agreed to invite the Regional Schools Commissioner to meet the Committee regarding academies in the county and that the Independent Chair of the SEND Improvement Advisory Board should also be invited to attend a future meeting on SEND. The Committee also agreed to consider full information on comments and complaints across Children's Services and relational and restorative work across the Local Area Partnership.

The Committee **NOTED** the work programme for the next meeting, with an updated programme for the remainder of the year to be drawn up.

The Chair expressed the Committee's thanks to officers for their attendance and for their preparation and engagement.

41/25 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER (Agenda No. 8)

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

42/25 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS (Agenda No. 9)

The Committee **NOTED** the Cabinet response to the report on The Virtual School.

Before the Chair closed the meeting, the Executive Director of People explained that Fridays were consistently difficult for senior officers and requested that the Committee consider moving its meetings to another weekday. The Committee **AGREED** to this in principle and **DELEGATED** to the Scrutiny Officer, in consultation with the Chair and the Deputy Chair, to engage with officers to identify potential alternatives.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing