



EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Friday, 13 June 2025 commencing at 1.00 pm and finishing at 3.45 pm.

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Liz Brighthouse OBE - in the Chair
Councillor Andy Graham (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Dr Izzy Creed
Councillor Rebekah Fletcher
Councillor Johnny Hope-Smith
Councillor Emma Markham
Councillor Toyah Overton
Councillor James Plumb

Co-Opted Members: Hana G

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council
Councillor Glynis Phillips
Councillor John Shiri

Officers: Stephen Chandler, Executive Director of People
Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services
Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion
Deborah Smit, Assistant Director of SEND and Inclusion
Stephen Good, Home to School Transport Programme Manager
Jean Kelly, Deputy Director of Children's Social Care
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.

23/25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS (Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Heritage, with Cllr Fletcher substituting. Apologies were also received from the co-opted members Katie N and Peace Nnaji.

Cllr John Shiri attended online as a guest of the Chair.

24/25 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS (Agenda No. 2)

There were none.

25/25 MINUTES (Agenda No. 3)

The minutes for the meetings on 28 March 2025 and 20 May 2025 were **APPROVED** as true and accurate records.

26/25 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS (Agenda No. 4)

Cllr Phillips, as the member for Barton, Sandhills & Risinghurst, addressed concerns about reduction of bus services for children attending Wheatley Park School, and concerns about the safety of their children who would need to cross the dual carriageway without a pedestrian crossing. Cllr Phillips also raised concerns over the safety of the cycle path.

Kimberly Morgan highlighted systemic failings by Oxfordshire County Council in supporting SEND children, referencing 13 cases upheld by the Local Government Ombudsman. She emphasised the need for a fit-for-purpose action plan and trauma-informed approaches, urging the Committee to ensure the proposed policies genuinely meet the needs of SEND children.

Anita Steptoe shared her experience as a mother of a child with autism and developmental delays, detailing the failures in handling her son's EHCP and the distress caused by inadequate support. She called for an apology from the Council and urged the Committee to ensure no other parent endures similar hardships.

Claire Brenner, speaking on behalf of the Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) working group, discussed the need for detailed, comprehensive guidance on EOTAS, expressing concerns about the current draft policy and its lack of clarity. She emphasised the importance of trauma-informed approaches and urged the Committee to ensure the policy and guidance are co-produced with parents and reflect their needs.

Neil Barry, speaking as a parent of a former Woodeaton student, described the decline of Woodeaton Manor School, attributing it to the exodus of over fifty staff members and the failure of the interim governing board. He referred to early visits by the Chief Executive of the Propeller Academy Trust and alleged conflicts of interest among governors.

Melody Drinkwater addressed the Committee on behalf of Oxfordshire SEND Parent Action and set out the group's concerns about the Council's response to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) directive for section 19. She emphasised the trauma experienced by the SEND community and called for measures to mitigate harm and address unmet needs. Ms Drinkwater expressed disappointment with the lack of co-production in the latest plan and urged the Committee to consider an extraordinary meeting with stakeholders before the next Cabinet meeting in July.

Katie Squires described her son's experience at Woodeaton Manor School. Initially supportive, the school faced issues when the headteacher took leave, leading to staffing problems and reduced timetables. High staff turnover caused disruption, triggering her son's anxiety and self-harm. Essential therapies ceased, and parent communication declined. Ms Squires withdrew her son, who lacked alternative provision for seven months. She called for accountability and highlighted the impact of this situation.

Nadine Haigh shared her experience as a full-time caregiver to two teenagers needing EOTAS packages. She requested a short-term deferral of the draft EOTAS policy for genuine consultation with parents.

D/Cllr Sally Whiteman explained that she had sat on the Committee until the May 2025 election and expressed concerns about the lack of communication from Woodeaton about future plans and lack of transparency over the dealings of Woodeaton. She encouraged the Committee to ensure they scrutinised the issue in full.

Emma Bliss discussed the severe impact of trauma and burnout on families needing EOTAS. She described the catastrophic effects of trauma on children, including loss of basic abilities and constant distress. Ms Bliss criticised the EOTAS policy for not mentioning trauma and stressed the importance of a trauma-informed approach.

Tressa Verrier highlighted that parents generally want their children in school and criticised schools for failing to meet children's needs, leading to crises and the need for alternative provision. Ms Verrier shared her personal experience of her son being ignored by his school, resulting in him walking out and eventually refusing to return. She emphasised the importance of the action plan arising from the Section 19 report kicking in quickly to save children and reduce costs for the local authority.

The Chair had invited Oxfordshire Parent Carer Forum to address the Committee, with Jules Francis-Sinclair, the Co-Chair, raising concerns about the Section 19 response's lack of clarity, transparency, and accountability. She noted that the Council had admitted confusion about its duties, leading to legal issues. Ms Francis-Sinclair criticised the action plan's development without proper consultation and harmful language in documents. She called for a formal apology, meaningful co-production, and improved oversight of Section 19 and EOTAS guidance.

27/25 EDUCATION ACT 1996 (SECTION 19) - RESPONSE TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN'S REPORT

(Agenda No. 5)

The Leader of the Council, Cllr Liz Leffman, attended to present the Council's response to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's (LGSCO) report and was accompanied by Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion, and Deborah Smit, Assistant Director of SEND and Inclusion. The report set out learning from complaints to the Council relating to s.19 provision and the process of developing the Council's s.19 approach

and Pathway of Action to manage applications for provision following 15 days of school absence.

The Leader of the Council acknowledged the importance of addressing the issues raised by the Ombudsman's report on Section 19. She thanked all those who had addressed the Committee for their feedback on all items and stressed the importance of getting all the policies under consideration right.

The Director of Children's Services explained the requirement to comply with the Ombudsman's directives and the challenges faced in meeting the 15-day timeframe for alternative education provision. She acknowledged difficulties in either returning children to school or providing alternative provision within the specified period and highlighted the need for staff training to address these issues.

The Committee sought assurance that those whose complaints had been upheld had received an apology and was advised that an apology and remedy were issued within the process of responding to the Ombudsman's process, often before the formal upholding of complaints. The discussion highlighted that the cases spanned the last five years, during which a pattern of not taking having taken decisive legal action was identified.

Members sought clarification about the requirement to provide alternative provision (AP) within 15 days, and raised concerns that starting legal action against the family would be counterproductive. The Deputy Director acknowledged this concern and explained that the legislation required either the child to return to school or alternative provision to be arranged within 15 days. If neither was achieved, the Council must prosecute the parents for non-attendance, which had been a difficult position for staff who aimed to prioritise the child's needs.

Members raised concerns about the action plan's lack of Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) outcomes. The Deputy Director stated that the current plan met the Ombudsman's requirements, with detailed targets to follow in a forthcoming policy. Whilst outlining necessary actions, it lacked specific metrics. Members also asked about the process flowchart's users and its scope.

The Deputy Director explained it was for officers dealing with children not attending school due to varied reasons like medical issues or exclusions. The flowchart aimed to clarify processes for legal compliance. The Council initially drafted it and would consult schools for agreement. It was complex but that was because the process was complex. It was intended for officers to use rather than being intended for the public.

A question was raised about making policy effective and measurable, and whether there was an element of co-design to keep children in education. The Deputy Director explained that the alternative education provision working group was working on guidance for alternative education provision, involving the Oxfordshire Parent Carer Forum and other stakeholders. It was acknowledged that it was difficult to write a policy that was general enough to cover all needs while being specific to individual children.

Members discussed the obligations under section 19 and the measures in place to engage with school leadership and governors given the timeline pressures. The Deputy Director explained that the county attendance team worked with individual schools, meeting with secondary schools fortnightly to discuss attendance and support for children. The aim was to address issues early and to ensure children do not remain out of school for 15 days without intervention.

The Committee asked if the concerns raised about the culture at the Council by some public speakers, particularly around engagement with families, were founded and sought assurance that steps had been taken to improve the culture. Officers highlighted initiatives like attendance and home education officers engaging with communities and explaining policies in libraries.

The Committee was advised that the Council aimed to strengthen relationships by involving parent carer fora and stakeholders in projects. Staff were supported with trauma-informed practices to boost their confidence in decision-making. The focus was on consistent, reliable decisions and increased dialogue with parents. The Council recognised the need for ongoing improvement in relationships and culture.

The Committee established that the training on the s.19 duty, emphasising responsibilities and legal requirements, provided to 42 members of staff referenced in the report had been mandatory for all relevant staff. This included county attendance officers and Children Missing Education officers.

The Committee agreed that, if the s.19 approach and Pathway of Action was agreed by Cabinet, that it would expect to receive a monitoring report early in 2026.

The Committee agreed that it would be helpful to receive case-studies of individual children's pathways (suitably anonymised). The Committee also expressed interest in understanding how trauma-informed education and restorative practice were being developed in schools and requested more information on this. It would welcome attendance of one of the Headteachers involved in developing the school-led alternative education provision to a future meeting.

ACTION:

The Deputy Director to provide more detailed data on children who were not attending school in these circumstances as part of the data pack expected for the meeting of the Committee on 11 July 2026.

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

- That, notwithstanding the complexity of the processes being set out, the Council should ensure that the process chart at Annexe B should be re-designed to make it clearer and easier to follow;
- That the Council should ensure there is adequate resource – both financial and practical – to ensure the s.19 approach and Pathway of Action can function adequately;

28/25 HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT POLICY

(Agenda No. 6)

The Leader of the Council, Cllr Liz Leffman, attended accompanied by Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion, and Stephen Good, Home to School Transport Programme Manager, to present the Home to School Transport Policy before it was to be submitted to Cabinet for its approval on 17 June 2025.

The Leader highlighted that this was the first consultation on the policy in ten years and reminded the Committee that, whilst a financial contribution from families for post-16 travel had been consulted on, it had been decided not to pursue this proposal.

The Programme Manager's presentation on Home to School Transport highlighted the public consultation undertaken between January and March 2025, addressing four key areas. The goal was to align the policy with the Department for Education's guidelines and to make it user-friendly for officers, parents, and schools. Out of 649 responses, many supported wording changes and improvements. However, there were objections to contribution charges due to the cost-of-living crisis, limited SEND resources, and potential educational barriers. The policy refresh aimed to simplify aspects without altering service eligibility or provision.

Members expressed concerns about the seeming rigidity of the home-to-school transport system, sharing experiences of using different transport methods for one family. They suggested that a more flexible and individual approach could save money. The Programme Manager agreed and said that the Council was considering personal transport budgets to provide flexibility. He also noted that offering budgets for parents to take their children to school could reduce transport costs and improve family integration.

Members raised concerns about the perceived unfairness in the county-wide policy and asked if officers were aware of where issues remain unresolved, as well as how often the policy was reviewed. The Programme Manager acknowledged recurring issues such as spare seats, split villages, and communication about transport changes. He mentioned ongoing efforts to address these through business-as-usual operations and closer collaboration with schools. The Deputy Director clarified that the policy was reviewed annually, unless changes in legislation necessitated earlier updates.

Members questioned the impact of transport policies on rural areas in Oxfordshire, highlighting the high cost of school buses and the removal of the spare seats scheme, which exacerbated inequalities and challenges for families in isolated villages. The Programme Manager acknowledged the challenges faced by rural communities and the need for broader integration across transport policies to ensure these areas were not isolated.

The Programme Manager mentioned that while the home-to-school transport policy covered statutory provisions, there was a need for wider community support and

better communication to mitigate the impact of changes. The Programme Manager also noted that the removal of the spare seats scheme had been a recurring issue, and efforts were being made to address it responsibly and ensure families were informed and supported during transitions.

Members inquired about the rising costs of the home-to-school transport service and the potential need for difficult decisions in the future. Members also requested information on the demographics of people using the transport scheme. The Deputy Director acknowledged the significant cost of the service, which was around £42 million annually, and the complexity of managing 3m transport transactions over a 38-week period. She emphasised the importance of getting children to school but recognised the need for broader discussions on how to use the funds more effectively.

The Leader added that the decision not to charge post-16 students was made because the potential revenue of £200,000 would not significantly impact the overall budget but would affect individual families. The Deputy Director mentioned that the demographics of people using the transport scheme could be provided in future discussions, as it was relevant to understanding the impact on different communities.

The Committee AGREED to the following actions:

- The Deputy Director to seek an answer on the bus being withdrawn in Risinghurst and respond to Cllr Phillips and inform the Committee.

The Committee AGREED to recommendations under the following headings:

- That the Council should work at pace to organise personal transport budgets with appropriate flexibility to take account of individual circumstances.
- That the Council should ensure regular review of the policy is to mean 'annual', subject to legislative changes.

29/25 DRAFT EOTAS POLICY (Agenda No. 7)

The Leader of the Council, Cllr Liz Leffman, accompanied by Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion, and Deborah Smit, Assistant Director of SEND and Inclusion, presented the latest Draft Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) policy.

The Leader acknowledged the feedback from the working group and emphasised the importance of having a policy in place for EOTAS. She stressed the need to get the policy right and mentioned that while feedback was welcome, it was crucial to resolve the policy in a timely fashion. The Leader noted that the work on this policy has been ongoing for a year and expressed the desire to finalise it quickly.

The Deputy Director presented the draft policy and the draft parents' guide for EOTAS, noting that the parents' guide was still being worked on. She emphasised the importance of having a framework for officers, parents, families, and children to understand what EOTAS was and what it entailed. The policy aimed to ensure

fairness and transparency. The Deputy Director mentioned that the policy was modelled on good practices from other local authorities and recommended agreeing to the policy while accepting that it may need adjustments once implemented. She highlighted the urgency of having a policy to be compliant, as the lack of an EOTAS policy was noted in the 2023 SEND inspection.

Members inquired about the timeline for finalising the draft parents' guide and whether the Committee would have the opportunity to review the guide prior to its submission to the Cabinet. They also questioned the extent of co-production involved in developing the guide. The Deputy Director clarified that they were collaborating with the Oxfordshire Parent Carer Forum (OxPCF) to organise working sessions, with the goal of completing a final draft by the end of June. The Deputy Director further elaborated on the collaborative efforts with parents and carers, noting that the policy and guidance were being co-produced through approximately 10 meetings with various groups, including the EOTAS Support Group and OxPCF. Additionally, a listening event was held last September, and both health colleagues and an external lawyer had contributed to the process.

The Committee also sought clarification on which other Councils' practices were looked at when developing the EOTAS policy. The Deputy Director specifically cited, the modelled good practices of, Camden and Islington as examples.

The Committee discussed whether guidance should be written and presented at the same time as the policy or, alternatively, if the policy was required before guidance could be provided on the policy. The Committee discussed the importance of having the policy in place promptly to ensure compliance and transparency. It was agreed that the policy should be finalised quickly while allowing time for parent carers to provide input on the guidance.

Members raised concerns about the substantial increase in the number of children receiving EOTAS over the last few years and the high cost associated with it. The Deputy Director clarified that there were, at the time, 60 children and young people receiving EOTAS packages, with the total cost around £3-4 million. She explained that the average cost per child could be worked out, however the actual cost of each child/young person on an EOTAS package varied significantly depending on their individual needs, with some far below or above the average cost.

With the amount of money being spent on EOTAS packages, Members wanted more clarity on the monitoring section of the EOTAS policy, asking for specifics on how monitoring would be conducted and what should take place. The Deputy Director explained the monitoring aimed to ensure high-quality education for children and young people receiving EOTAS packages. Each alternative education provider was visited to verify the quality of education provided, ensuring they had appropriate safeguarding policies and were registered correctly. Monitoring included annual visits, due diligence checks, and ensuring providers deliver high-quality education.

The Committee followed up asking how the recipients' performance and progression under EOTAS packages were being monitored to ensure they were appropriate. The Deputy Director confirmed that the performance and progression of children in EOTAS packages were monitored as part of the annual review of their EHCPs. She

highlighted that the success of these packages was evident, mentioning that two young people on EOTAS packages had been offered places at the University of Oxford and the University of Durham.

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

- That the Council, if the draft policy is approved by Cabinet, should commit to co-producing the guidance in a timely fashion with it being reviewed by the Committee before it is submitted to Cabinet

30/25 WOODEATON MANOR SCHOOL UPDATE (Agenda No. 8)

The Leader of the Council, Cllr Liz Leffman, presented an update on Woodeaton Manor School. The Leader was accompanied by Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion, and Deborah Smit, Assistant Director of SEND and Inclusion.

The Deputy Director presented a comprehensive report on resolving the outstanding issues at Woodeaton Manor School, covering autumn 2023 to May 2025. However, she warned that the departure of several officers during 2023 affected the report's robustness. Initial concerns about student safety and the school's leadership were identified in summer 2023 by school improvement partners and communicated to the administration. The Grade II* listed building posed safeguarding challenges due to insufficient investments. An Ofsted inspection rated the school as inadequate, leading to its mandated academisation by the year's end. In January 2025, the Council formed a service level agreement with Propeller Academy Trust for effective management. A monitoring visit in March 2025 showed significant operational improvements.

The Committee inquired about the current pupil outcomes at Woodeaton and what transitional support had been offered to the students. The Deputy Director responded that the leadership and management at the school, along with Propeller Academy Trust, have been providing significant support to the students. It was also mentioned that Ofsted noted substantial improvements in the school's operations.

The Committee inquired about accusations against Woodeaton's governing board, such as lack of investment and conflicts of interest. The Deputy Director stated that, following the foundation governing board's resignation in autumn 2023 and the school's forced academisation, an interim executive board was monitored monthly. In January 2025, a service level agreement with Propeller Academy Trust was established to enhance board capacity and support. Immediate actions were taken to address governance issues and ensure strong leadership. The Director confirmed ongoing Council efforts to monitor and support the school's leadership.

The Committee was concerned that the BBC had learned about Woodeaton's plans to move site before parents. The Deputy Director explained that the BBC's article had picked up the information when the agenda was published for this Committee. After learning about the article, the Council informed Propeller Academy Trust and the Interim Transition Board, who then updated parents and the community. The Deputy

Director confirmed that the Council always aimed to keep parents, and the community, informed about important developments, including delays in academisation due to site issues.

The Committee discussed the high staff turnover at Woodeaton, including the headteacher's departure, and asked about measures to prevent future staff losses impacting timetables. The Deputy Director stated that monthly meetings with the Interim Transition Board or headteacher and chair of governance ensured prompt issue resolution. She highlighted Woodeaton's unique complexity as the last foundation school in a listed building. The Assistant Director of SEND and Inclusion added that extra support such as speech therapy, educational psychology, and staff supervision aimed to stabilise the school and maintain pupils' education despite staff turnover.

The Deputy Director explained that the current site was not fit for purpose. The Council was working with property colleagues to identify suitable sites for relocation. However, she could not provide specific details or timelines due to the complexity of the process, which involved property, district councils, and planning permissions. The Director emphasised that the Council was committed to finding a suitable site that met the needs of the pupils and provided an appropriate 21st-century learning environment.

When asked about increased parental involvement at Woodeaton, the Deputy Director explained that the academisation process is managed by the Department for Education (DfE) and regional directors. The Council, due to current legislation, cannot involve parents in this process, which she regretted.

The Committee asked about the methods the Council used to identify issues in schools without solely relying on head teachers' self-reporting and how the Council ensured that no concerns were concealed within budgets. The Deputy Director explained that the Council now conducted more thorough examinations of school budgets, assessing whether sufficient funds were allocated to necessary areas such as building maintenance. This process involved finance colleagues and contributed to strategy group meetings. She noted that this approach was intended to be more effective than previous practices in preventing hidden issues.

The Committee discussed the relative merits of conducting an investigation and declined to do so at this stage.

The Chair was keen to invite the Regional Schools Commissioner to a future meeting to discuss oversight of academies.

The Committee made no recommendations.

31/25 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN (Agenda No. 9)

The Committee agreed to **NOTE** the forward plan and discuss fully the work programme at a subsequent meeting. The Director of Children Services encouraged

the Committee to engage in the wide range of children's services, especially in the legislative changes in children's services, adoption and corporate parenting.

The Chair also advised the Committee of a short item for the July meeting on School meals and services, led by Lorna Baxter, Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer. The Committee **AGREED** to receive the item in July.

32/25 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER

(Agenda No. 10)

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

33/25 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS

(Agenda No. 11)

The Committee **NOTED** the draft Cabinet response on the Local Area Partnership SEND update.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing