

Notice of a Meeting

Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Friday, 26 June 2026 at 10.30 am

Room 2&3 - County Hall, New Road, Oxford OX1 1ND

These proceedings are open to the public

If you wish to view proceedings, please click on this [Live Stream Link](#).
However, that will not allow you to participate in the meeting.

Membership

Chair: Councillor Liz Brighthouse OBE

Deputy Chair: Councillor Andy Graham

Councillors: Dr Izzy Creed Emma Markham Vacancy
Georgina Heritage Toyah Overton
Johnny Hope-Smith James Plumb

Co-Optees: Fraser Long Toby Long Peace Nnaji

Date of Next Meeting: *22 September 2026*

For more information about this Committee please contact:

Committee Officer: *Richard Doney*

Email: *scrutiny@oxfordshire.gov.uk*



Martin Reeves, OBE
Chief Executive

June 2026

What does this Committee review or scrutinise?

The Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee focuses on on the following key areas a) All services and preventative activities/initiatives relating to children, young people, education (including Home to School Transport and Special Educational Needs and Disability but excluding adult education), and support of families; b) The Council's statutory functions in relation to children's social care and safeguarding. This includes public health as they relate to children and young people where they are not covered by the Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee; c) Matters relating to care leavers and the transition between children's and adult services d) The welfare of unaccompanied young asylum seekers e) Services for Young Carers

How can I have my say?

We welcome the views of the community on any issues in relation to the responsibilities of this Committee. Members of the public may ask to speak on any item on the agenda or may suggest matters which they would like the Committee to look at. **Requests to speak must be submitted to the Committee Officer below no later than 9 am 4 working day before the date of the meeting.**

About the County Council

The Oxfordshire County Council is made up of 69 councillors who are democratically elected every four years. The Council provides a range of services to Oxfordshire's 763,200 residents.

These include:

schools	social & health care	libraries and museums
the fire service	roads	trading standards
land use	transport planning	waste management

Each year the Council manages £1.2 billion of public money in providing these services. Most decisions are taken by a Cabinet of 10 Councillors, which makes decisions about service priorities and spending. Some decisions will now be delegated to individual members of the Cabinet.

About Scrutiny

Scrutiny is about:

- Providing a challenge to the Cabinet
- Examining how well the Cabinet and the Authority are performing
- Influencing the Cabinet on decisions that affect local people
- Helping the Cabinet to develop Council policies
- Representing the community in Council decision making
- Promoting joined up working across the authority's work and with partners

Scrutiny is NOT about:

- Making day to day service decisions
- Investigating individual complaints.

What does this Committee do?

The Committee meets at least 4 times a year. It develops a work programme, which lists the issues it plans to investigate. These investigations can include whole committee investigations undertaken during the meeting, or reviews by a panel of members doing research and talking to lots of people outside of the meeting. Once an investigation is completed the Committee provides its advice to the Cabinet, the full Council or other scrutiny committees. Meetings are open to the public and all reports are available to the public unless exempt or confidential, when the items would be considered in closed session.

If you have any special requirements (such as a large print version of these papers or special access facilities) please contact the officer named on the front page, giving as much notice as possible before the meeting

A hearing loop is available at County Hall.

AGENDA

1. **Apologies for Absence and Temporary Appointments**

To receive any apologies for absence and temporary appointments.

2. **Declaration of Interests**

See guidance note on the back page.

3. **Minutes (Pages 9 - 18)**

The Committee is recommended to **APPROVE** the minutes of the meetings held on 27 February, 2026, and on 12 May, 2026.

4. **Co-optee Recruitment Update (Pages 19 - 24)**

The Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer has provided an update on co-optee recruitment.

The Committee is recommended to consider the report and to **NOTE** the update on activity undertaken to fill the Committee's vacant co-optee post for a parent governor and **AGREE** to appoint Leah Q and Elza B as co-opted young people members subject to each completing and submitting a Register of Interests form, for two years, from the next scheduled meeting of the Committee.

5. **Petitions and Public Addresses**

Members of the public who wish to speak on an item on the agenda at this meeting can attend the meeting in person or 'virtually' through an online connection.

Requests to speak must be submitted no later than 9am three working days before the meeting, i.e., Tuesday 23 June, 2026.

Requests should be submitted to the Scrutiny Officer at scrutiny@oxfordshire.gov.uk.

If you are speaking 'virtually', you may submit a written statement of your presentation to ensure that if the technology fails, then your views can still be taken into account. A written copy of your statement can be provided no later than 9am on the day of the meeting. Written submissions should be no longer than 1 A4 sheet.

Where there are a number of requests from persons wishing to present similar views on the same issue, the Chair may require that the views be put by a single spokesperson. It is expected that only in exceptional circumstances will a person (or organisation) be allowed to address more than one meeting on a particular issue in any period of six months.

The public is reminded that the Committee is not a decision-making body and that it cannot investigate individual complaints. The Committee requests that no individual children are named when addressing the Committee.

6. **JTAI Inspection Report of the Multi-Agency Response to Child Sexual Abuse in the Family Environment in Oxfordshire (Pages 25 - 36)**

The Committee has requested a report arising from the Joint Targeted Area Inspection carried out by Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation. The inspection considered the multi-agency response to child sexual abuse in the family environment in Oxfordshire.

Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Carol Douch, Assistant Director Safeguarding QA Partner, and colleagues from across the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership have been invited to present the report.

The Committee is asked to consider the report and raise any questions, and to **AGREE** any recommendations it wishes to make to Cabinet arising therefrom.

7. Best Start in Life Plan (Pages 37 - 62)

The Committee has requested a report on the Best Start in Life Plan, which was approved by Cabinet on 19 May, 2026, and has invited Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, and Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Delia Mann, Deputy Director Children's Social Care, Annette Perrington, Deputy Director Education and Inclusion, and Sophie Black, Assistant Director Early Help Prevention to present the report.

The Committee is asked to consider the report and raise any questions, and to **AGREE** any recommendations it wishes to make to Cabinet arising therefrom.

8. Best Start Family Hubs in Oxfordshire (Pages 63 - 100)

The Committee has requested a report on the development of Best Start Family Hubs in Oxfordshire.

Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, and Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Delia Mann, Deputy Director Children's Social Care, and Sophie Black, Assistant Director Early Help Prevention, have been invited to present the report.

The Committee is asked to consider the report and raise any questions, and to **AGREE** any recommendations it wishes to make to Cabinet arising therefrom.

9. SEND Improvement Notice Letter (Pages 101 - 106)

The Committee has requested a report on the SEND Improvement Notice letter.

Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, and Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Annette Perrington, Deputy Director Education and Inclusion, Laurie Baker, Deputy Director Education and Inclusion, and Deb Smit, Assistant Director SEND and Inclusion, have been invited to present the report.

The Committee is asked to consider the report and raise any questions, and to **AGREE** any recommendations it wishes to make to Cabinet arising therefrom.

10. Committee Forward Work Plan (Pages 107 - 112)

The Committee is recommended to **AGREE** its work programme for forthcoming meetings, having heard any changes from previous iterations, and taking account of the

Cabinet Forward Plan and of the Budget Management Monitoring Report.

11. Committee Action and Recommendation Tracker (Pages 113 - 118)

The Committee is recommended to **NOTE** the progress of previous recommendations and actions arising from previous meetings, having raised any questions on the contents.

12. Responses to Scrutiny Recommendations (Pages 119 - 128)

Attached is the Cabinet responses to the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee reports on:

- The Local Area SEND Partnership
- Attainment
- EOTAS
- Fostering
- The Virtual School

The Committee is asked to **NOTE** the responses.

Councillors declaring interests

General duty

You must declare any disclosable pecuniary interests when the meeting reaches the item on the agenda headed 'Declarations of Interest' or as soon as it becomes apparent to you.

What is a disclosable pecuniary interest?

Disclosable pecuniary interests relate to your employment; sponsorship (i.e. payment for expenses incurred by you in carrying out your duties as a councillor or towards your election expenses); contracts; land in the Council's area; licenses for land in the Council's area; corporate tenancies; and securities. These declarations must be recorded in each councillor's Register of Interests which is publicly available on the Council's website.

Disclosable pecuniary interests that must be declared are not only those of the member her or himself but also those member's spouse, civil partner or person they are living with as husband or wife or as if they were civil partners.

Declaring an interest

Where any matter disclosed in your Register of Interests is being considered at a meeting, you must declare that you have an interest. You should also disclose the nature as well as the existence of the interest. If you have a disclosable pecuniary interest, after having declared it at the meeting you must not participate in discussion or voting on the item and must withdraw from the meeting whilst the matter is discussed.

Members' Code of Conduct and public perception

Even if you do not have a disclosable pecuniary interest in a matter, the Members' Code of Conduct says that a member 'must serve only the public interest and must never improperly confer an advantage or disadvantage on any person including yourself' and that 'you must not place yourself in situations where your honesty and integrity may be questioned'.

Members Code – Other registrable interests

Where a matter arises at a meeting which directly relates to the financial interest or wellbeing of one of your other registerable interests then you must declare an interest. You must not participate in discussion or voting on the item and you must withdraw from the meeting whilst the matter is discussed.

Wellbeing can be described as a condition of contentedness, healthiness and happiness; anything that could be said to affect a person's quality of life, either positively or negatively, is likely to affect their wellbeing.

Other registrable interests include:

- a) Any unpaid directorships
- b) Any body of which you are a member or are in a position of general control or management and to which you are nominated or appointed by your authority.

- c) Any body (i) exercising functions of a public nature (ii) directed to charitable purposes or (iii) one of whose principal purposes includes the influence of public opinion or policy (including any political party or trade union) of which you are a member or in a position of general control or management.

Members Code – Non-registrable interests

Where a matter arises at a meeting which directly relates to your financial interest or wellbeing (and does not fall under disclosable pecuniary interests), or the financial interest or wellbeing of a relative or close associate, you must declare the interest.

Where a matter arises at a meeting which affects your own financial interest or wellbeing, a financial interest or wellbeing of a relative or close associate or a financial interest or wellbeing of a body included under other registrable interests, then you must declare the interest.

In order to determine whether you can remain in the meeting after disclosing your interest the following test should be applied:

Where a matter affects the financial interest or well-being:

- a) to a greater extent than it affects the financial interests of the majority of inhabitants of the ward affected by the decision and;
- b) a reasonable member of the public knowing all the facts would believe that it would affect your view of the wider public interest.

You may speak on the matter only if members of the public are also allowed to speak at the meeting. Otherwise you must not take part in any discussion or vote on the matter and must not remain in the room unless you have been granted a dispensation.

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EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Friday, 27 February 2026 commencing at 10.02 am and finishing at 12.57 pm.

Present:

Voting Members:

Councillor Liz Brighthouse OBE - in the Chair
Councillor Andy Graham (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Gareth Epps
Councillor Rebekah Fletcher
Councillor Georgina Heritage
Councillor Johnny Hope-Smith
Councillor Emma Markham
Councillor James Plumb

Co-Optee Members:

Fraser Long (*Virtually*)

**Other Members in
Attendance:**

Cllr Gaul, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People
Cllr Dr Izzy Creed (*Virtually*)

Officers:

Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services
Annette Perrington, Interim Deputy Director of Education
and Inclusion
Jaswinder Didially, Assistant Director – School and
Settings (Sufficiency)
Kim Wilson, Assistant Director – Schools and Settings
(Standards, Effectiveness, and Performance)
Jessica Dawson, Manager, Early Years Centre
Georgina Newbould, Manager of Early Years Sufficiency
and Access
Michelle Jenkins, Early Years Quality Improvement
Manager

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.

9/26 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Overton, substituted by Cllr Epps, and from Peace Nnaji. Cllr Dr Creed tendered apologies and attended online as a guest of the Chair.

10/26 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

(Agenda No. 2)

There were none.

11/26 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 30 January 2026 were **APPROVED** as a true and accurate record on the meeting.

The Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee that the process to recruit to Young Person co-optees was under way, with interviews expected on 31 March 2026.

12/26 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

(Agenda No. 4)

There were none.

13/26 EARLY YEARS

(Agenda No. 5)

Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Annette Perrington, Interim Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion, Jaswinder Didiaily, Assistant Director – School and Settings (Sufficiency), Kim Wilson, Assistant Director – Schools and Settings (Standards, Effectiveness, and Performance), Jessica Dawson, Manager, Early Years Centre, Georgina Newbould, Manager of Early Years Sufficiency and Access, and Michelle Jenkins, Early Years Quality Improvement Manager, were invited to present a report on Early Years provision.

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People apologised that the Early Years paper had been published later than it ought to have been owing to ongoing discussions on tackling inequalities in early childhood development. Three interconnected strands of work were outlined: the Best Start in Life plan, Early Years sufficiency, and improving the Good Level of Development (GLD) at age five. Although the Council performed above national averages overall, outcomes for children from deprived backgrounds remained significantly lower. The Cabinet Member emphasised that national targets were not sufficient to close this gap, and the Council had therefore adopted more ambitious local objectives.

The Interim Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion introduced the presentation by describing the governance supporting the Best Start in Life plan. The Children's Trust Board oversaw both the Early Years Board and the Early Help Prevention Board, making it the most suitable body to lead the work. Early Years activity extended across safeguarding, early support for families, quality improvement, sufficiency planning and wider partnerships, including public health and the Oxford Education and Inclusion Partnership (OEIP) The final plan was required to be submitted to the Department for Education by 31 March 2026, and membership and supporting infrastructure continued to evolve.

The Assistant Director for Schools and Settings (Sufficiency) provided the framework for the sufficiency strand, noting that the detailed childcare sufficiency report was nearing completion. A balance was needed between expanding provision and

supporting the sustainability of existing settings, particularly in the context of changing duties and financial pressures.

A detailed overview of childcare sufficiency was given by the Manager for Early Years Sufficiency and Access. Oxfordshire delivered Early Years entitlements through nearly 800 providers, the majority within the private, voluntary and independent sector. Whilst overall take-up exceeded national averages, participation among disadvantaged two-year-olds had fallen sharply. Targeted actions had already raised this from 59% in the summer of 2025 to 77% in the autumn. Geographic gaps in provision for younger children were highlighted, alongside ongoing capital projects, efforts to repurpose surplus spaces, models offering extended hours, and challenges around workforce recruitment and retention.

Technical and operational insight was added by the Early Years Centre Manager, who reinforced the importance of careful, forward-looking planning to meet the expanded entitlements.

The Chair then invited the Committee to explore the issues further.

Discussion opened with the potential to expand sensory provision beyond formal educational environments. Suggestions included developing sensory gardens and community spaces using Section 106 contributions. Officers welcomed the proposal as an example of innovative thinking and confirmed that work with planning colleagues was ongoing to ensure developers were challenged appropriately. They agreed to take forward the suggestion, recognising the value of community-based sensory environments for children with additional needs.

The Committee considered rural provision, where pockets of deprivation existed but population levels were too low to sustain larger group settings. Officers explained that the Council's focus included supporting and expanding childminders, offering grants to employ assistants, and working closely with school-based nurseries, which were often the only local option. Efforts to repurpose existing spaces in rural schools to create capacity for younger children were also underway. These approaches aimed to ensure that rural families were not disadvantaged by geography.

Members explored the realism of the revised GLD targets and the associated timescales. Officers noted that GLD improvement tended to progress slowly, as outcomes reflected children's development across several years and were an annual snapshot. Whilst some impact could be achieved with children already in Reception, the most substantial shift would not be visible until 2028, when younger children currently receiving enhanced support reached school age. Annual measurement of GLD limited short-term indicators but milestones would be included within the Best Start in Life plan, supported by multi-agency governance and robust stress-testing.

The ambition of the GLD target for children eligible for free school meals (FSM) was debated. With current performance at 43%, the target of 50.8% required significant improvement. The Cabinet Member emphasised that his concern centred on the inequality gap, which would narrow only marginally, from 29% to 27%, even if the target were met. Officers noted that the local targets sought stronger overall outcomes and a more meaningful reduction in the gap.

Members asked how the new targets had been set. The Cabinet Member, and Officers, explained that the Government applied a national methodology that increased local baselines by a fixed amount. Oxfordshire's revised targets, however, reflected the Council's ambition to close the inequality gap, rather than a formulaic calculation. Supporting parents was essential to achieving these aims. Officers highlighted resources such as "50 Things To Do Before You're Five," which encouraged parents to enhance home-learning, language and play. Simple, everyday activities remained central to boosting early development.

Further discussion examined how progress could be assessed before children reached the rising-five stage. Officers confirmed that whilst GLD was measured only at the age of five, a range of indicators, including communication and language assessments, Early Years audits, targeted interventions and take-up of funded two-year-old places, helped to track improvement earlier. Although visible change would take time, ongoing work in speech and language, workforce training and strengthened early-help pathways was already showing positive signs. The Best Start in Life plan would formalise clearer monitoring arrangements.

The Committee considered how to incentivise Early Years providers in deprived areas to raise FSM children's outcomes. Officers acknowledged national challenges around recruitment, qualifications and pay, noting that Early Years professionals often earned less than staff in retail roles. Work with Further Education colleges, secondary schools and careers advisers sought to promote childcare as a skilled profession and strengthen the training pipeline. The recent increase in Early Years funding passed through the Dedicated Schools Grant aimed to support quality and sustainability in disadvantaged areas. Officers emphasised that raising FSM attainment required skilled staff, strong partnerships and accessible community support.

Questions were raised regarding how Section 106 funding for Early Years provision was secured, tracked and ultimately spent. Officers explained that Children's Services were part of the Section 106 board and worked closely with planning colleagues to monitor whether contributions were "held" or "secured," as this determined when they could be drawn down. Local misunderstandings sometimes arose about the availability of funds, and clearer communication with providers and communities was being strengthened. Increasingly, the Council was challenging developers using precise locality-level data and engaging with providers to ensure money was directed to areas of greatest need.

The Committee discussed opportunities for childminders to meet informally so the children in their care could socialise, reflecting past models such as Sure Start group sessions. Officers acknowledged the value of such opportunities but noted practical constraints, especially the difficulty of travelling with multiple young children. Work was underway to strengthen local, accessible support through family hubs and school-based spaces, and further options for meet-ups would be explored.

Members sought assurance that FSM children outside identified high-need areas received appropriate support. Officers agreed that many FSM families lived in dispersed or rural locations. Practitioners were trained to identify children's needs

individually, regardless of postcode. Tools such as WellCom assessments, speech-and-language programmes and school-based interventions were applied county-wide. Data monitoring also highlighted schools with weaker FSM outcomes, allowing targeted support where required. The Best Start in Life plan would reinforce consistent support across the county.

Broader socio-economic barriers were discussed, including housing, income, access to services and parental support. Officers explained that improved partnership working was underway through the Marmot programme, early help networks and family hubs. Work continued to improve data-sharing, explore automatic enrolment for FSM eligibility, and to connect with welfare and housing teams to maximise family income.

The Committee examined the recent decline in take-up of the two-year-old additional support entitlement. Officers reported that this was mainly driven by the introduction of the new working-parent entitlement. Some low-income families were eligible for both schemes but chose to claim only the 30-hour entitlement to avoid perceived stigma. This meant eligible children were not recorded under the additional support measure. Significant work had since taken place to move families to the correct combined funding route, increasing take-up from 59% to 77% between summer and autumn. Improving take-up remained a priority within the Best Start in Life plan.

The Committee adjourned at 11:40, and reconvened at 11:51.

14/26 SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL TERMS OF REFERENCE (Agenda No. 6)

The Committee requested that terms of reference be drawn up for a Scrutiny Review Panel regarding Woodeaton Manor School.

The Committee **AGREED** with the approach and schedule of meetings set out in the report, subject to the amendments below.

Paragraph 3: It will be focussed on the potential for learning lesson and improving practice and will explore how the Council responded when **during the period in which** the school received a mandatory academisation order.

Paragraph 4: The Panel will seek to identify an lessons that could be learned and consider whether, upon receiving **in the period surrounding the receipt of** the notice, the Council acted as it reasonably ought to have done.

The Committee discussed the scrutiny review panel's membership allocations. The initial proposal suggested a five-member panel reflecting political proportionality: three Liberal Democrat Group, one Labour & Co-operative Party Group, and one Oxfordshire Alliance Group. Alternatively, it was suggested that the Committee could appoint members from each political group represented on the Committee. That alternative composition would comprise: two Liberal Democrat Group members; one Labour and Co-operative Party Group member; one Oxfordshire Alliance Group member; one Green Party Group member.

After discussion, the Committee **AGREED** to a third version taking account of the spirit of political proportionality requirements in paragraph 10 of the Terms of Reference but expanding to six members for broader representation. If three members of the Liberal Democrat Group agreed to sit, the Committee **AGREED** that there would be, three Liberal Democrat Group members; one Labour and Co-operative Party Group member; one Oxfordshire Alliance Group member; one Green Party Group member. If there were not to be three Liberal Democrat Group members, it would have the alternative composition in the paragraph above.

The Committee **AGREED** to the provisional membership as follows:

- Cllr Bekah Fletcher (Liberal Democrat Group)
- Cllr Andy Graham (Liberal Democrat Group)
- Cllr Emma Markham (Green Party Group)
- Cllr James Plumb (Oxfordshire Alliance Group)

The Labour and Cooperative Party Group member would be confirmed at a later date. The sixth member, who would be from the Liberal Democrat Group, would also be confirmed at a later date.

15/26 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS (Agenda No. 7)

There were none due.

16/26 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN (Agenda No. 8)

Cllr Gaul, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, and Annette Perrington, Interim Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion, attended to support the Committee.

The Interim Deputy Director briefed the Committee on the Government's new White Paper covering schools and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reforms, emphasising its significance and connection to national strategies like Best Start in Life and the Child Poverty Strategy. The reforms proposed a shift back to a graduated support model, similar to School Action and School Action Plus, reserving Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) for only the most complex needs.

This approach had already sparked concerns among parents about access to individualised support and a potential rise in assessment requests. Councils were expected to prepare immediately, addressing infrastructure, governance, early intervention, sufficiency, and mainstream inclusion, with the possibility of running two systems in parallel until legislation was finalised.

The Director described the reforms as a seismic change, comparable to the post-Children Act 2004 restructuring, and highlighted the challenge of maintaining a strategic view to avoid unintended consequences.

The Committee questioned whether the Government's offer to write off 90% of the Council's Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) SEND deficit was guaranteed; officers clarified that this depended on the quality of the SEND Reform Plan, due by 17 May 2026, and its subsequent assessment by the Department for Education. The plan's approval could result in a £146 million benefit, but the Council must provide robust evidence of its ability to reduce overspends and drive long-term change, with the approval bar set high.

The Committee discussed how best to ensure all councillors were properly informed about the scale and implications of the SEND White Paper. The Director advised that an all-member briefing would be helpful so that councillors could answer residents' questions confidently and understand the wider reforms underway. She emphasised that regular updates and clear communications would be important as the reforms developed and the Council prepared its response.

The Committee discussed how best to schedule future meetings in light of the workload arising from the SEND White Paper and the requirement to produce a draft SEND Reform Plan. Members **AGREED** that the 27 March 2026 meeting should be cancelled, as, given the additional meeting in January, the Committee had already met more frequently than required under the provisions of the Council's Constitution.

Instead, they proposed holding an informal meeting of members of the Committee, rather than a formal session, towards the end of April or early May, once officers had sufficiently progressed the draft plan. This informal session would allow members to consider early proposals before the plan went forward for wider sign-off. It was also **NOTED** that, because the meeting would be informal, attendance requirements would not apply and members could join online.

17/26 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER
(Agenda No. 9)

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

..... in the Chair

Date of signing

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EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Tuesday, 12 May 2026 commencing at 11.57 am and finishing at 11.58 am.

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Liz Brighthouse OBE
Councillor Andy Graham
Councillor Dr Izzy Creed
Councillor Georgina Heritage
Councillor Johnny Hope-Smith
Councillor Emma Markham
Councillor Toyah Overton
Councillor James Plumb

Officers: Anita Bradley, Director of Law & Governance
and Monitoring 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.

18/26 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS (Agenda No. 1)

The co-opted members had tendered their apologies.

19/26 ELECTION OF CHAIR FOR THE 2026/27 COUNCIL YEAR (Agenda No. 2)

Cllr Brighthouse was nominated by Cllr Dr Creed and seconded by Cllr Plumb.

There being no other nominations, Cllr Brighthouse was deemed Chair for the 2026/27 municipal year.

20/26 ELECTION OF DEPUTY CHAIR FOR THE 2026/27 COUNCIL YEAR (Agenda No. 3)

Cllr Graham was nominated by Cllr Heritage and seconded by Cllr Brighthouse.

There being no other nominations, Cllr Graham was deemed Deputy Chair for the 2026/27 municipal year.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing

EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 26 June 2026

Co-optee Recruitment Update

Report by Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Committee is **RECOMMENDED** to: -
 - 1.1 **NOTE** the update on activity undertaken to fill the Committee's vacant co-optee post for a parent governor;
 - 1.2 **AGREE** to appoint Leah Q and Elza B as co-opted young people members subject to each completing and submitting a Register of Interests form, for two years, from the next scheduled meeting of the Committee.

Executive Summary

2. Co-opted members have a dual function to the operation of a Scrutiny committee. Not only do they bring specific, relevant expertise or experience but, coming from outside both the Council and the party-political system they provide greater public assurance of the independence and non-political output of the Scrutiny function. This report seeks to update the Committee on efforts made to date to identify nominees for co-option onto the Committee and to recommend the appointment of two co-opted young people.

Background

3. Within the Council's constitution it is outlined that the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee membership includes space for six co-opted members, four of whom relate to education, and two to young people.
4. The Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee's terms of reference includes the following in relation to co-opted members:

"In addition to the county councillors the Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee shall include in its membership the following voting representatives:

 - (a) one Church of England representative appointed by the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education;

- (b) one Roman Catholic representative appointed jointly by the Archbishop of Birmingham and the Bishop of Portsmouth to represent the Roman Catholic Church;
 - (c) two persons who shall be parent governors of maintained schools elected in accordance with a procedure approved by the Council.
 - (d) two persons who, at the time of their original appointment, shall be aged 25 or under and either living in Oxfordshire or working for an organisation in Oxfordshire supporting or representing children and young people.”
5. The committee currently has filled the co-optee positions for the Church of England and Roman Catholic representatives and has one vacancy for a parent governor.
 6. The use of the word ‘shall’ in reference to the membership of the Committee means that the Committee does not have discretion to do otherwise and must seek to fill these vacancies. Officers have been seeking to do so.

Progress Updates

Parent Governor Nominees

7. The need to include co-opted members from parent governors is set out in legislation. Under s. 3 of the Parent Governor Representatives (England) Regulations 2001 it is a requirement that ‘a local education authority shall appoint at least two but not more than five parent governor representatives to each of their education overview and scrutiny committees and sub-committees.’ Since its inception, the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee has become the scrutiny committee responsible for education and therefore must include opportunity for at least two parent governor representatives.
8. The 2001 Regulations prescribe the process for selecting these representatives, which is to hold an election amongst parent governors between those who are eligible and have put themselves forward for nomination.
9. Peace Nnaji was co-opted to sit as a co-opted member of the Committee from the February 2025 meeting. There remains a vacancy with periodic advertising. Most recently, in June 2026, all parent governors were contacted using the Council’s communication tool, Governor Hub, and also Schools News to publicise the opportunity. Parent governors have been invited to apply by 23 July 2026 in order to be part of the election. If only one parent governor were to apply then, in the absence of further applicants, it would not be necessary under the 2001 Regulations to run an election. Subject to formally establishing their eligibility and completing formalities around becoming a co-opted member, this individual would become a co-opted member of the committee.

10. It is unlikely, given the historic and national challenges in securing parent governor co-opted members, but, if more governor representatives come forward before the deadline than there are vacancies, an election will have to be run amongst parent governors to establish the nominees.
11. Under the 2001 Regulations, if no or insufficient numbers of nominees are received, the Council must attempt to fill the vacant position(s) every six months.

Young People

12. After a widespread advertising campaign, supported by the Council's Engagement team, nine candidates submitted applications. Of these, four were short-listed and invited for interview. The interview panel was made up of a member of the Engagement team, Cllr Brighthouse, the Chair of the Committee, and Richard Doney, the Committee's Scrutiny Officer.
13. In the view of the panel, all of the candidates interviewed were appointable. However, the panel agreed that Elza B and Leah Q most clearly understood the remit of the Committee and also demonstrated an understanding of the representative nature of the role. Both of these candidates also demonstrated a clarity and incisiveness that would make a valuable contribution to the Committee's proceedings. The Panel therefore agreed that they should be recommended to the Committee for appointment. By the time of the Committee's meeting, neither candidate will be under the age of 18.

Next Steps

14. A co-optee is a full member of the Committee and not merely an external advisor to the Committee. This means they have access to the same information provided to other committee members and can participate on equal terms. The only difference is that, in the rare instances that the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee wishes to vote on an issue, unless that topic relates to education provided by the Council, the Constitution determines they will be unable to do so. As a consequence of this status, it is necessary that co-opted members are bound by the Members' Code of Conduct and sign a Declaration of Interest form.
15. The agreed terms of reference for the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee state that 'Co-opted Members shall normally serve for a period of 2 years. Co-opted members may serve for one further consecutive period of 2 years with the agreement of the Committee. After this, the Committee must run an open recruitment process for any further two-year extensions. No co-opted member may serve for longer than eight years in total.' Any appointment made, therefore, should be for 2 years in the first instance.

16. Support to understand and fully participate in the formal and rule-based environment of a committee will be provided. Officers from the Scrutiny function will offer support to the young co-opted members in working with one another and with other members of the Committee, including councillors; support in understanding the papers, drawing up lines of enquiry and ways to express those views safely in a public environment.

Corporate Priorities

17. By bringing a greater diversity to membership of the Committee, and therefore strengthening the quality of Scrutiny, co-opted members will add to the differing approaches in addressing how to become a fairer, greener, healthier Oxfordshire.

Financial Implications

18. The role of co-optee is not a paid position, but co-optees do qualify for the same rights to travel and subsistence as Councillors, as detailed in Part 10.1 Sch 1 of the Constitution.
19. There are no other significant financial implications in relation to this report.

Comments checked by:

Drew Hodgson,
Strategic Finance Business Partner for Law and Governance.

Legal Implications

20. The legal implications are detailed within the body of this report. There are no further direct implications arising from this report.

Comments checked by:

Jay Akbar, Head of Legal and Governance Services

Staff Implications

21. Support for co-opted members around understanding, navigating and remaining safe requires staff support from the Scrutiny function, which it has provided to other co-opted members and will continue to do so.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

22. As younger people, it is incumbent on the Council to ensure that adequate support is provided. The package of support is designed to provide such support.

Risk Management

23. Co-opted members, particularly young ones, may well need support to fulfil their responsibilities, sitting as equal members with councillors. This is not without risk. The primary steps being taken to mitigate these risks are the provision of support and protocols for the delivery of the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
24. The final details of the protocols include:
- Enhanced training for all Scrutiny staff on safeguarding
 - A named safeguarding lead (the Scrutiny Manager) and an escalation point (their line manager)
 - Only staff holding co-optee e-mail addresses and all communications going through them. For minors, e-mails to copy in a parent or other nominated person.
25. Failure to fill the co-optee vacancies on Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee would not only reduce the experience and knowledge available to the Committee and impair the public's confidence in the apolitical nature of Scrutiny, but it would also mean the Committee would be operating outside the membership determined by Council in the Constitution.

Consultations

26. None arising from this report.

Anita Bradley
Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer

Annex: None

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

Contact Officer: Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer

June 2026

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HM Inspectorate
of Probation



CareQuality
Commission



14 May 2026

Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Oxfordshire County Council
Dr Martin Reeves, Chief Executive, Oxfordshire County Council
Dr Nick Broughton, Chief Executive, Thames Valley Integrated Care Board
Matthew Barber, Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner
Jason Hogg, Chief Constable, Thames Valley Police
Tom Browning, Regional Probation Director South Central
Ian Sutherland, Independent Scrutineer

Dear Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership

Joint targeted area inspection of Oxfordshire

This letter summarises the findings of the joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) of the multi-agency response to child sexual abuse in the family environment in Oxfordshire.

This inspection took place from 9 to 13 February 2026. It was carried out by inspectors from Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP).

The inspectorates recognise the complexities in providing a multi-agency response to children and families where there is a risk of child sexual abuse in the family environment. This joint inspection of the multi-agency response to children who are at risk or victims of child sexual abuse in the family environment will highlight areas of practice and strategic leadership that need to improve as well as strengths. All references to children in this letter relate to children at risk or victims of child sexual abuse in the family environment. We anticipate that these JTAs will identify learning for all agencies and will contribute to the debate about what good practice looks like. These JTAs are being carried out in accordance with the recommendation from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (CSPRP) report into child sexual abuse in the family environment.

Headline findings

When children are at evident risk of being sexually abused in their families, or they have disclosed that they have been sexually abused, the response to safeguard and support them is swift and effective in the majority of circumstances. Children benefit from prompt access to therapeutic support, and police investigations are well coordinated and timely. When there are exceptions to this, it is usually linked to poor communication about the level of risk posed by sexual offenders.



The quality, timeliness and effectiveness of information-sharing across key partner agencies is inconsistent, and while there are pockets of strong practice in terms of professional curiosity and being alert to the possibility of child sexual abuse in families, this level of awareness is variable across the local safeguarding partnership. When there are indicators of child sexual abuse but there has not been a disclosure by the child, these indicators are not always recognised or responded to soon enough.

Although the number of children at risk of sexual abuse in the family environment who are being identified is slowly increasing from a low starting point, and this improving identification is a positive, the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (OSCP) is not currently making the best use of the information and expertise at its disposal to fully understand the extent, nature and gravity of child sexual abuse across the county.

Alongside statutory partner agencies, schools and the community sector are active participants in building capacity to identify children at risk of sexual abuse, but the probation service is not meaningfully involved at a strategic, and often operational, level.

What needs to improve?

- The involvement of the probation service in the partnership at a strategic level.
- Coordination and analysis of performance information and data to better understand the type and prevalence of child sexual abuse in the family environment and to target resources accordingly.
- The quality and effectiveness of safety planning for children.
- The sharing of information between and within partner agencies to identify and assess risks to children.
- Identification of children who are at risk of child sexual abuse in the family environment when there has not been a clear disclosure of sexual abuse.
- The range and impact of specific training on child sexual abuse in the family environment provided to include more staff who do not have specialist roles.
- The identification and assessment of risk posed to children by adult sex offenders.
- The rigour and effectiveness of the multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) process.



- Levels of confidence and curiosity across the partnership when children's behaviour may indicate that they are being sexually abused in the family.

Strengths

- The consistency and strength of professional networks around children and their families when it has been recognised that there has been child sexual abuse in the family.
- The contribution of the local authority clinical psychologists to helping social workers understand the barriers to working with children who have been sexually abused in their family.
- Trusting and safe relationships between children, investigating officers and social workers during police investigations that help children know what is happening and why.
- The timeliness and quality of police investigations once child sexual abuse has been identified in a family.
- How quickly children have access to therapeutic support.
- The response by the local authority designated officer (LADO) to allegations of child sexual abuse made against adults in a position of trust, including the assessment of transferable risks.
- The strengthening of practice because of joint training of police officers and social workers on how to conduct video and achieving best evidence (ABE) interviews.
- The role of education providers in supporting children who have been sexually abused.

Main findings

When referrals into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) clearly identify that children have been, or are at immediate risk of being, sexually abused in the family environment, almost all are responded to quickly. Children and young people are prioritised for examinations by the sexual assault referral centre (SARC), and timely strategy discussions take place, including relevant staff from most key partner agencies. Within the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), specialist therapeutic teams such as Horizon and the child and adolescent harmful behaviours service (CAHBS) act quickly, offering joint visits and trauma-informed assessment without waiting lists. These teams support children who have been sexually abused and children displaying harmful sexual behaviours towards family members.

Some initial assessments lack reflection and insight when the risk of sexual abuse is less clear, lacking the depth to support informed next steps in supporting the child and reducing the risk of sexual harm in the family. This is in part due to the volume of referrals into the MASH from a variety of sources that provide information without sufficient risk analysis by the referrer.

The probation service in particular is not consistently involved in identifying and assessing risks associated with present and past child sexual abuse by adults who pose a risk to children. Consequently, a small number of children are left in situations of unassessed risk. The partnership took action to remedy an instance of this through a reconvened child protection strategy discussion following increased concerns from the inspection team.

At the early point in the identification and referral of children at risk of sexual abuse, and beyond, there are several gaps in information-sharing. For example, police information is only shared with children's social care; there is limited information-sharing between probation and children's services; schools do not always gather information that they need from other schools; and several parts of the health service do not consistently receive updates from children's social care. This is particularly the case for primary care settings, including GPs. As a result, professionals supporting children do not always have full knowledge of the factors influencing the current level of risk.

Licence conditions for adults who pose a risk to children are not always informed by management of sexual offenders and violent offenders (MOSOVO) staff, police officers and children's services assessing risk together prior to offenders being released. Partner agencies are often unaware of what the safety plan is for children, beyond the involvement of children's social care and, sometimes, the police. The sharing of outcomes from planning meetings with partner agencies is inconsistent.

When children receive support, the majority of work is child centred and focused on the child's experiences, both of child sexual abuse and of their childhood in general. The context of their background, history, age and ability is considered and responded to sensitively. Effective and meaningful relationships are built with children and their families to help them navigate their futures after the trauma of being sexually abused. In many children's experiences, this work is exemplary and achieves the difficult balance between painful conversations and unconditional support. For most children, direct work leads to a comprehensive understanding of their world, timely multi-agency action and effective plans that give them the knowledge to build positive relationships.

The quality of safety planning varies and, for many children, lacks a fully informed assessment of adults, and other children, who might cause them harm in the family. Initial plans typically result in either the victim or the alleged perpetrator of sexual

abuse being removed from the family. If this is not the case, adults who have been charged with keeping children safe are rarely assessed to find out if they have the capacity to do so. The result is too often an unrealistic expectation on adults who may lack the capacity to protect and may themselves have been victims of sexual or other kinds of abuse.

Children are helped to understand what has happened to them and to begin to heal, through the provision of trauma-informed and relational services. This is the case in the SARC, throughout child protection investigations, when they are seen by community paediatricians, and have consistent social workers and investigating police officers. These approaches and this level of understanding are inconsistent in probation practice, when it involves or relates to children.

Practitioners in specialist services, for example the disabled children's service, help children to 'be seen and heard' in line with the findings of the child safeguarding practice review panel 2024 report, 'I wanted them all to notice'. Practitioners are alert to the fact that children's behaviour may indicate that they are being sexually abused in their family. This approach is supported by the effective use of practice tools, augmented communication techniques and consistent personal relationships.

Most social care assessments are detailed and clearly gain the voice of the child and an understanding of their world. The voices of children and their individual needs are not consistently gathered by staff from other partner agencies. Although police officers increasingly record the voice of the child, this information is not consistently used to best effect. The gathering and consideration of children's voices in probation risk assessments is underdeveloped, and there is more to do to capture the voice of the child in MAPPA meetings, as there is too often an overreliance on children's social care to reflect this.

MAPPA threshold panels are under review by the coordinator, as the majority of requests by probation practitioners to increase the level of MAPPA management of offenders, to better reflect the risk they pose, are being rejected and risk management reviews often take place without safeguarding updates from partner agencies. As a result, the risks posed to children are not fully understood, and this means that suitable actions are either not agreed or do not adequately reflect the nature and level of the risks present.

In families with complex needs and risks, when the involvement of professionals is longer term, practice is variable. In most work, ongoing support during police investigations is strong; it is planned effectively and is provided in children's timescales. Support from the in-house clinical psychology team helps social workers understand some of the barriers to making progress experienced by many children and families and to adjust planning accordingly. In weaker work, there is a compartmentalised response to risk with other forms of abuse not being addressed

once sexual abuse in the family environment becomes the focus. Similarly, professionals can lose sight of adults on the periphery of families who pose a risk to children. As a result, planning often lacks enough urgency and progress is slow.

When there are allegations of child sexual abuse made about adults in positions of trust, the LADO organises timely, multi-agency meetings. Detailed information-sharing leads to clear plans that help to ensure that children are well protected. In addition, the LADO draws themes and trends from their work to inform training and resource allocation across the partnership.

Dedicated and experienced workers from a range of commissioned services support children and families who are victims of child sexual abuse in the family environment. The children and young person's independent sexual violence adviser (ChISVA) team provides highly valued, specialist support for adults and children with recent or historical experiences of sexual abuse. However, the ChISVA service is working to the edge of its capacity because of delays in the court system.

When a criminal offence is suspected in relation to child sexual abuse in the family environment, there is an effective, child-centred multi-agency response. Investigations are timely and of good quality with meaningful supervisory reviews. Appropriate decisions are made when risks to children are identified. Some delays are seen when investigations involve the examination of electronic devices and because of lengthy delays in the criminal justice system.

When the police have an offender on bail who is suspected of child sexual abuse in the family environment, the starting point is to use police bail to impose conditions to safeguard children. This is working effectively. When the suspect is a child, partnership discussions inform the most appropriate response that includes safeguarding both children.

The police have an established approach for responding to the Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme (CSODS, also known as Sarah's Law) right to ask requests when there are concerns about individuals who may pose a risk of sexual harm to children. The decision to make the disclosure is informed by effective multi-agency information-sharing. The CSODS disclosure is made by specialist child protection officers who are best placed to help the requester understand the risks to the child or children. Although officers are aware of CSODS, not all are aware of how the police execute their responsibilities under this scheme.

When children have disclosed sexual abuse, joint investigations involving the police and social workers are well managed. There is clarity to their differing roles, and this is well explained to children and to parents. These investigations are timely and result in the children being well supported in very difficult circumstances. The partnership training offer for ABE interviews is good. Both social workers and police

attend joint training. This also results in more confident and analytical social work because of how the training strengthens workers' understanding of joint investigations and evidence-gathering.

A good offer is in place through the offender personality disorder pathway (OPDP), which enables probation practitioners to consult forensic psychologists for guidance on formulating risk management strategies.

There is some targeted delivery of the 'Building Choices' accredited programme for men who commit sexual offences, although waiting times for this programme are long. This has included tailored work with a small group of men with needs related to neurodiversity and a small group with learning difficulties.

Community service is organised and used well to help reintegrate men who sexually offend into the community in a safer way, and to reduce the risk of further offending. With similar positive impact, welfare support for people on probation includes building networks of both support and accountability to help them understand and manage their lives more safely.

Most schools have clear, effective systems in place to ensure that they have the knowledge to play their part effectively in the identification and support of children who are at risk of, or are victims of, child sexual abuse in the family environment. They largely advocate for children from a position of knowledge and understanding, ably supported by the education safeguarding advisory team (ESAT). Information is shared in the best interests of children. Sensitive, joint working reduces risk and supports the child. While schools monitor children affected by child sexual abuse in the family environment closely, there is sometimes an overreliance on verbal disclosure before taking action.

Currently, and across the partnership, profiling, data sets and subsequent targeting are not sophisticated or used in the most effective way. The safeguarding partnership has undoubtedly made significant progress in understanding the nature and extent of child sexual abuse linked to exploitation, but this has not been replicated for children at risk of sexual abuse in the family environment.

However, there are several key building blocks in place that the partnership has identified that have the capacity to support a greater understanding of why identification and reporting are low. Work on aligning relevant data sets from across the partnership, and on analysing and reporting on this, is at a stage where additional information could be included. Analysis by clinical psychologists, audits and practice weeks and better use of the academic rigour available in the local authority's research policy hub are other examples.

There is a distinct lack of engagement between probation and the safeguarding partnership. This is the case at a strategic level and, to a large extent, at an operational level. Significant pressures on the probation service, linked to a relatively inexperienced staff group compounded by staff shortages and difficulties with staff recruitment and retention, are key factors in this separation at an operational level. Strategically, there is little evidence of a strongly developed focus on child sexual abuse in the family environment that has probation 'at the table' in a meaningful sense. However, as a response to the inspection, an openness to improving this relationship has begun.

Changes to the structure and governance of the OSCP have resulted in a more streamlined and effective approach to monitoring and strengthening practice. Several mechanisms to evaluate the quality of practice are in place and are well established, for example regular police/SARC meetings, performance and quality assurance frameworks, practice weeks, quarterly partnership oversight, and improving internal logs for tracking referrals about children. As a partnership, the OSCP has a good understanding of the areas it needs to strengthen, particularly in terms of shared data and analysis.

A survey on professional curiosity and the impact of multi-agency audits on child sexual exploitation, including those completed for this inspection, has helped the partnership to increase confidence levels for many staff in being aware of the possibility of child sexual abuse in the family environment. In the last four months, the partnership has created a strategic risk register where issues escalated to delegated safeguarding partners are recorded.

Leaders and managers across the statutory partner agencies regularly engage in critical reflection. To strengthen the voice of children at a strategic and practice level, the partnership has recently recruited participation workers, one within the OSCP, to increase ways for survivors of sexual abuse and their families to be involved in shaping policy and resources. The partnership maintains a focus on continuous improvement over several different themes, including child exploitation, which have varying degrees of connectedness to this area of practice. However, there is insufficient overlap to enable a sufficient understanding of the prevalence and profile of child sexual abuse in the family in Oxfordshire.

Not all professionals know how to escalate issues when there is disagreement between partner agencies about the level of risk children are exposed to, often because of a lack of knowledge or confidence. When professionals do formally escalate their concerns, this is not always recorded.

The number of police staff in Oxfordshire trained to investigate child sexual abuse in the family environment is comparatively high. The police have invested heavily in the learning and development of staff to investigate child sexual abuse in the family

environment, including a bespoke supervisory investigation course which focuses on the quality of MASH referrals and risk assessments leading to an improved initial response.

The safeguarding partnership promotes multi-agency learning about identifying, assessing and responding to generic safeguarding effectively. Across the wider partnership, some of this training lacks the depth that practitioners need to respond to child sexual abuse in the family environment.

In comparison, the delivery of the specialist child abuse investigation development programme (SCAIDP) course, delivered jointly by staff from children's social care, the police and health, provides a holistic approach. The training on offer to specialist workers, when they access it, is reflective and contemporary, and equips staff with the skills and knowledge they need to deliver high-quality services to children who may have been sexually abused in their family. The partnership has already identified that increasing attendance and mapping the impact of training is an area for further consolidation.

Practice study: highly effective practice

This example highlights how consistent relationships and 'thinking the unthinkable' can protect children who do not use their voice as their main way of communicating.

A primary school-aged child was referred to the MASH by his school. Unable to verbalise his feelings, some of his behaviours were worrying the school and had become sexual in nature, towards both children and staff. This was also the case at home. Much of the assessment of what the risks were to others was based on observation by highly skilled teaching and family support staff. Crucially, the assessment reflected on why the child may be behaving in this way, with sexual abuse in the family considered as a potential reason from the outset. This and other possibilities, including what he may have seen in real life or online, and sexual behaviour linked to sensory-seeking behaviour, were clearly identified and considered, with evidence gathered to test each hypothesis. The workers engaged the family sensitively with all the options, supported by consultation with clinical psychologists about the best way to remain non-judgemental but alert to possibility. As a result, the family, including this child and his sibling, have a network of support that is set up to notice changes in behaviour, mood, emotional responses and physical demeanour. Cultural genograms, and direct work on boundaries and relationships, have made the environment safer for the child and other children he spends time with.



Practice study: area for improvement

This example highlights the impact on children of poor risk assessment and information-sharing.

This child lives with his mother, father and two siblings. The local authority's children's services were concerned for his and his siblings' welfare following a disclosure by his father's now adult daughter that she had previously been sexually abused by the father. Children's services checked with probation if the father was known to them and probation initially stated that he was 'not known', which was a serious error. On further enquiry, it was established that the father is a serial perpetrator of domestic abuse and previous allegations of child sexual abuse, and more recent allegations of harassment had been made against him. Concerningly, the probation service assessed the father as posing a medium risk of serious harm and approved his release from prison on home detention curfew to live with his vulnerable partner and children. The father was reassessed following a child protection strategy meeting, and probation then took appropriate action to change the conditions of his licence to remove him from the address the same day, a decision that should and could have been made significantly sooner.

Next steps

We have determined that Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services (DCS), in her capacity as chair of the OSCP, is the principal authority and should prepare a written statement of proposed action responding to the findings outlined in this letter. This should be a multi-agency response involving the individuals and agencies that this report is addressed to. The response should set out the actions for the partnership and, when appropriate, individual agencies. The local safeguarding partners should oversee implementation of the action plan through their local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

The DCS should send the written statement of action to ProtectionOfChildren@ofsted.gov.uk by 21 August 2026. This statement will inform the lines of enquiry at any future joint or single-agency activity by the inspectorates.



HM Inspectorate
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Yours sincerely

Yvette Stanley
National Director Regulation and Social Care, Ofsted

Professor Aidan Fowler
Interim Chief Inspector of Healthcare, CQC

Kathryn Stone OBE
His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary
His Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Martin Jones CBE
His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Probation

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EDUCATION & YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 26 June 2026

Best Start in Life Plan

Report by the Director of Children's Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Education & Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to**
 - (a) Note and provide any comments on the Best Start in Life plan and the agreed monitoring arrangements, approved by Cabinet on 19 May 2026.

Executive Summary

2. Overall Oxfordshire is characterised by high-quality childcare provision, low levels of deprivation and positive child development outcomes. However, we know this is not the case for everyone. Some families face barriers linked to poverty, poor health, trauma, isolation or wider pressures, which can make it harder to access support or to give children the start they want for them.
3. The Oxfordshire Best Start in Life Plan sets out a shared ambition that every child in Oxfordshire has the best possible start in life, and that families receive the right support, at the right time, in the right place. The Plan focuses on the period from pregnancy to school entry, when timely, coordinated support can make the greatest difference.
4. The Plan aligns national policy, local priorities and partner delivery into a single, outcome-focused approach. It strengthens joint working across health, early years, education, early help and the voluntary and community sector, with a clear focus on prevention and reducing inequalities.
5. The Best Start in Life Plan was approved at Health and Wellbeing Board on 29 April 2026 and Cabinet on 19 May 2026.

Ambitions of the Best Start in Life Plan

6. In July 2025, government published the Giving every child the best start in life strategy. This is the government's strategy for improving child development and meeting the ambition that 75% of 5-year-olds in England have a good level of development (GLD) by 2028. The strategy has three core priorities:

- (a) Improving family services, providing high quality support to parents and children from pregnancy to age 5.
 - (b) More accessible early education and childcare.
 - (c) Improving quality in early years including reception.
7. To meet the National ambition of 75% of 5-year-olds to achieve a good level of development, each local authority has been given a local target. For Oxfordshire these are:
- (a) All eligible children 77.8% (Oxfordshire 2025 outcome 70% (2% above National))
 - (b) All free school meal (FSM) eligible children 50.8% (Oxfordshire 2025 Outcome 43% (7% below national))
8. As part of achieving this vision, all Local Authorities have been required to develop a Best Start in Life plan, which sets out how we will achieve our Good Level of Development target. The plan for Oxfordshire has been developed based on our existing Early Years Strategy and Early Help and Prevention Strategy.
9. Whilst we recognise the challenges of the national targets, we do not feel this is ambitious enough or that 1 in 4 children are not achieving GLD who are eligible for FSM is acceptable. Therefore, our approach has also included setting out revised local targets (RLT) to bring us in line with National performance and above the set local targets in 2026. Our revised local targets are therefore;
- (a) All eligible children 79.8% (2% above Local Target)
 - (b) All free school meal eligible children 59.8% (9% above Local Target)

Overview on the Best Start in Life Plan

10. Oxfordshire already benefits from a range of services to support the Best Start in Life offer, including libraries (offering a range of services), Family Help service, 0–19 Public Health Nursing Service, Family Information Service, and the early years SEND service. Across Oxfordshire there are also a wealth of Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector (VCFS) organisations delivering a range of services to families within the local communities.
11. The Best Start in Life Plan is designed to sustain and enhance this provision, building on established strengths to ensure families continue to receive timely, coordinated assistance. The plan aims to deliver even more comprehensive support, tailored to families' needs and accessible in their local communities.
12. The Best Start in Life plan sets out a clear vision that every child has the best start in life, and parents, parents-to-be, babies and young children have what they need to thrive.

13. Through achieving this vision, it will mean that all babies, children and families are: safe, learning, happy, healthy and engaged.
14. The plan sets out four key priorities to achieving this vision:
 - (a) **Healthy beginnings** - We will focus awareness raising of the importance of pregnancy and early childhood across all organisations in Oxfordshire and ensure additional support for families where this is needed.
 - (b) **Strong foundations** - We will focus on working with partners to deliver coordinated support through Family Hubs and the wider Family Hub Network, including a range of parenting programmes, and resources to support home learning, supporting families to stay safe and nurturing positive early relationships and supporting babies and children to learn.
 - (c) **High-quality early years learning** - We will focus on ensuring that all children can fully participate, achieve, and feel supported in the environments where they grow and develop. To support children to thrive and learn, we will invest in a strong and well-trained workforce and champion inclusive practice across the early years system.
 - (d) **Strengthen our Best Start in Life Offer** - We will focus on working together across services and with families through our Family Hub Network and Family Hubs to continue to develop a wider Best Start in Life offer which is available when families need support local to where they live. We will share our data and use this to identify what families need and where they need it.

What This Means for babies, for Children and Families

15. The vision and intended outcomes mean that children in Oxfordshire are happy and loved, safe and protected, healthy in body and mind, curious and learning, and ready for school and for life.
16. For Parents and carers, they will feel confident and supported, listened to and respected, and able to ask for help early without fear of judgement or stigma and every family gets the support they need, at the right time, in the right place.
17. We want families to experience support that feels welcoming, practical and joined up, with professionals working alongside them and building on their strengths.

Delivery and Governance

18. Best Start in Life is not a single service or programme. It is a shared way of working across Oxfordshire, with services and partners working together around families. This means listening to families, valuing lived experience, sharing information appropriately, and working collaboratively across health, education,

early years, Family Help, libraries, the voluntary and community sector and wider partners.

19. Our shared ways of working include:
 - Putting families and children at the centre
 - Acting early and preventing problems from escalating
 - Working with the whole family and wider support networks
 - Building strong, trusting relationships
 - Using evidence and learning to improve practice
 - Focusing effort where inequalities and need are greatest
20. The Best Start in Life Plan will report to the Children's Trust Board, which will hold overall responsibility for monitoring the performance and impact of the plan.
21. To support this, a Best Start in Life Plan Steering Group will be responsible for prioritising the plan, tracking progress, and addressing any risks or issues. The steering group will also ensure oversight of the combined budget and make recommendations on funding allocation to the appropriate boards.
22. Delivery of the Best Start in Life Plan will take place through the Oxfordshire Education Partnership, Early Years Board, and Early Help and Prevention Board, with progress and outcomes ultimately reported back to the steering group and Children's Trust Board and to the Health and Wellbeing Board
23. By June 19th the Council must submit a SEND Reform Plan to the Department for Education developed across Local Area partners. Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life Plan as a national policy is therefore referenced and included within the Oxfordshire SEND Reform Plan.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

24. The Children and Young People's Plan set out a vision of "Every child and young person will have the best possible start in life, the county will be a great place to grow up in, and children and young people will have opportunities to become everything they want to be. These life chances will be reflected equally across our rural and urban communities." As part of the plan, priority areas were identified, including providing help and support across the system at the earliest opportunity.
25. In Autumn 2024 the Early Help and Prevention Strategy was approved by the Children's Trust Board. The Early Help and Prevention Strategy in Oxfordshire is a comprehensive, multi-agency framework designed to ensure children,

young people, and families receive timely and effective support before needs escalate.

26. As well as an Early Help and Prevention Board, an Early Years Strategy was approved by the Children's Trust Board in April 2024. The Early Years Strategy sets out how we will work together across the Early Years system to give all babies and children the start in life they deserve.
27. The Council has partnered with the UCL Institute of Health Equity to become a Marmot Place. This means the Council has committed to tackling health inequalities and improving health fairness in Oxfordshire by working with local partners across the system. These include local authorities, communities, public services, businesses, and voluntary and community sector organisations. The initial areas of focus for the Marmot Programme are to: give every child the best start in life, creating a fair employment and good work for all and ensuring a healthy standard of living for all.
28. For all of the above the Best Start in Life Plan very much aligns to these strategies and programmes, and will be key delivering the strategic ambitions of providing earlier help and prevention and addressing inequalities.

Financial Implications

29. The Plan is expected to be funded by a combination of existing budget allocations which includes the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and Best Start Family Hubs grant allocations from the Department for Education.

Comments checked by:

Jane Billington, Strategic Finance Business Partner

Legal Implications

30. There are no significant legal implications arising from this report.

Comments checked by:

Craig Cochrane, Principal Lawyer, Child Care Legal Team

Staff Implications

31. The delivery of this plan will be achieved using existing resources. A strong emphasis will be placed on collaborative working across all relevant departments and partners, enabling us to join up and maximise our resources efficiently and effectively. This approach supports the Council's commitment to making the best use of available assets while maintaining high standards of service provision.

Comments checked by:

Amy Warner, Strategic People Partner HR and Culture Change Team

Equality & Inclusion Implications

32. As part of the development of the detailed implementation plan for the Best Start in Life Plan, an Equalities Impact Assessment will be undertaken, and will be overseen and owned by the Steering Group.

Sustainability Implications

33. As part of the development of the detailed implementation plan for the Best Start in Life Plan, a Climate Impact Assessment will be undertaken, and will be overseen and owned by the Steering Group.

Risk Management

34. The Best Start in Life Steering Group will be responsible for the identification, mitigation and monitoring of risks and issues to the delivery of Best Start in Life Plan. Where risks are required to be escalated, this will be to the Children's Trust Board.

Lisa Lyons
Director of Children's Services

Annex: Best Start in Life Plan

Contact Officer: Annette Perrington, Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion

May 2026



Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life Plan

Foreword

Councillor Sean Gaul,
Lead Member for Children's Services

“ We know that the early development of babies and children under 5 is crucial for long-term health and wellbeing, being ready for school and learning, and in shaping and unlocking children's potential, raising their aspirations as future citizens; so, they can be anything they want to be and this is why giving every child the best start in life is a priority for Oxfordshire.

We are ambitious for all our children but know that not every child is achieving their outcomes which will support their future lives.

Last year 7 out of 10 children reached their Good Level of Development but for children eligible for free school meals this was 4 out of 10, this is not good enough, we must close this gap and reduce this inequality, whilst improving outcomes

for all children, which is why we have set ourselves even more challenging targets than the Department of Education set Oxfordshire.

By 2028 we want 8 out of 10 children to achieve their Good Level of Development and be ready for school, and for those who are eligible for free school meals we will work tirelessly to close the gap so 6 out of 10 children are successful and thriving.

We know this is a challenging ambition, and we won't stop there, but it's a step in the right direction and we are committed and focussed to reducing this inequality and improving outcomes through this Best Start in Life Plan.”

**Lisa Lyons,
Director Children's Services**

“ Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life Plan sets out our shared commitment to ensuring all children, whatever their background or circumstances, are supported to thrive from the beginning.

It reflects our determination to strengthen families and give every child the strong foundations they need to grow and learn.

I am proud that children are at the heart of everything we do and of the ambitions shown across partners in developing our offer, together we are creating the conditions for children to grow up safe, happy, healthy, learning and engaged.

**Ansaf Azhar,
Director of Public Health and Communities**

“ Every child deserves the very best start in life. The experiences children have from pregnancy through their early years shape their health, wellbeing, learning and life chances far into the future.

When we get things right early on, we give children – and our communities – the strongest foundations to thrive.

Oxfordshire is a place where many children do well, but we know this is not the story for everyone. Some families face additional challenges, and too often these can affect children's development before they even start school. This Best Start in Life Plan sets out how we will work together to change that – by focusing on prevention, early help and making sure support is easy to find and access, when it is needed most.

This plan brings together partners across health, education, family support, early years settings and the voluntary, community and faith sector, alongside families themselves. By listening, learning and acting together, we can reduce inequalities and improve outcomes so that all babies and young children in Oxfordshire have the best possible start in life.

Every child's best start, together

Every baby and young child deserves the very best start in life. The experiences children have before they start school shape their health, learning and wellbeing for the rest of their lives. What happens in pregnancy and the early years has a lasting impact on children's physical health, emotional wellbeing, learning and relationships.

In Oxfordshire, many children do well. However, we know this is not the case for everyone. Some families face barriers linked to poverty, poor health, trauma, isolation or wider pressures, which can make it harder to access support or to give children the start they want for them.

This Best Start in Life Plan sets out, in clear and accessible language, what we want to achieve for babies, young children and families in Oxfordshire, and how services and partners will work together to make this happen. It focuses on the period from pregnancy through to starting school, when timely support can make the greatest difference.

Our ambition is straightforward: every child in Oxfordshire has the best possible start in life so every child can grow up safe, happy, healthy, learning and engaged and every family gets the support they need, at the right time, in the right place.

Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life vision

The vision and intended outcomes mean that children in Oxfordshire are happy and loved, safe and protected, healthy in body and mind, curious and learning, and ready for school and for life.

Parents and carers feel confident and supported, listened to and respected, and able to ask for help early without fear of judgement or stigma and every family gets the support they need, at the right time, in the right place.

We want families to experience support that feels welcoming, practical and joined up, with professionals working alongside them and building on their strengths.

★ **Every child has the best start in life, and parents, parents-to-be, babies and young children have what they need to thrive.** ★

Through achieving this vision, it will mean that all babies, children and families are:



Why the early years matter

The first years of life, starting in pregnancy, are a period of rapid brain development. Babies and young children learn through relationships, play, communication and everyday experiences. Warm, responsive relationships with parents and carers help children feel safe and secure and support the development of language, emotional regulation and social skills.

When families experience challenges such as poverty, poor mental health, domestic abuse or trauma, these can affect children very early on. Without support, difficulties can become more complex over time. Acting early – and working with the whole family – gives children the best chance to thrive and reduces the need for more intensive intervention later.

Working together around families

Best Start in Life is not a single service or programme. It is a shared way of working across Oxfordshire, with services and partners working together around families.

This means listening to families, valuing lived experience, sharing information appropriately, and working collaboratively across health, education, early years, Family Help, libraries, the voluntary and community sector and wider partners.

Our shared ways of working include:

- **Putting families and children at the centre**
- **Acting early and preventing problems from escalating**
- **Working with the whole family and wider support networks**
- **Building strong, trusting relationships**
- **Using evidence and learning to improve practice**
- **Focusing effort where inequalities and need are greatest**

Oxfordshire is proud to have partnered with Marmot and is a Marmot County, this means we are committed to addressing and reducing inequalities for all residents of Oxfordshire

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Current outcomes

As part of the development of the Best Start in Life Plan, analysis of a range of data was completed, including research undertaken by the Institute of Health Equity through our Marmot County status. Overall Oxfordshire is characterised by high-quality childcare provision, low levels of deprivation and positive child development outcomes, however not all children are achieving strong outcomes, and not all families are able to access the support they need, when they need it.

Families have told us that it can be hard to find out what support is available, where it is available and whether they are able to take up the current offers of support and services and partners should work more closely together.

We understand that each child and family is unique and may have different needs and require different support at different times and are committed to ensuring that support is available locally and when families need it.

Most children in Oxfordshire have positive outcomes in healthy beginnings, with lower rates of parental smoking at delivery, higher breastfeeding rates, and a reduced incidence of low birth weight compared to regional and national averages. However, nearly 21% of children by age five have visible dental decay and 8.3% prevalence of obesity at age 4-5 years, which can impact children's health as they grow.

Most babies and children in Oxfordshire live in stable and safe families, however we know that some families have additional challenges and needs which can impact upon babies and children's outcomes. We will support families who need additional support where they may be experiencing domestic abuse, struggling with mental health, or needing support with parenting.

Seven out of ten children in Oxfordshire are achieving their expected Good Level of Development outcomes, which is higher than the national average. For children who are eligible for free school meals this is just four out of ten and there has been a 10% decline in the number of 2-year-olds accessing early years settings where families are in receipt of additional support. 97% of eligible working parents with two-year-olds have accessed childcare and 95% of eligible parents of 3 and 4-year-olds are accessing childcare.

The majority of Early Years Providers are judged good or better by Ofsted in Oxfordshire (96%), which is higher than National giving confidence that practice and provision is good in most of our early years education settings.



0-4 population at a glance

37,800

children aged 0-4 years-old

8.3%

Reception prevalence of obesity at age 4-5

87.5%

of Oxfordshire children were achieving a Good Level of Development at age 2 to 2 and a half years

70%

of children achieved a Good Level of Development in 2025

43%

of children eligible for free school meals achieved a Good Level of Development

Greatest population increases in the south and northeast of the county

Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life priorities

Healthy beginnings

We will focus awareness raising of the importance of pregnancy and early childhood across all organisations in Oxfordshire and ensure additional support for families where this is needed.

Strong foundations

We will focus on working with partners to deliver coordinated support through Family Hubs and the wider Family Hub Network, including a range of parenting programmes, and resources to support home learning, supporting families to stay safe and nurturing positive early relationships and supporting babies and children to learn.

High-quality early years learning

We will focus on ensuring that all children can fully participate, achieve, and feel supported in the environments where they grow and develop. To support children to thrive and learn, we will invest in a strong and well-trained workforce and champion inclusive practice across the early years system.

Strengthen our Best Start in Life offer

We will focus on working together across services and with families through our Family Hub Network and Family Hubs to continue to develop a wider Best Start in Life offer which is available when families need support local to where they live. We will share our data and use this to identify what families need and where they need it.

Our Best Start in Life offer in Oxfordshire

Families in Oxfordshire can access a wide range of support, from universal services available to everyone, through to more targeted and intensive help for families who need additional support. We open our first Family Hub in Blackbird Leys in April and four further Family Hubs are planned.

Our focus is on making this offer easy to understand, easy to access and well joined up. Families should not have to navigate multiple systems or repeat their story. Instead, support should feel coordinated, relationship-based and shaped around what matters most to them.

This offer brings together health services, early years education and childcare, Family Hubs, Family Help, libraries, community spaces, and voluntary and community organisations working together around families.

The vision for Family Hubs in Oxfordshire is a network of provision across Oxfordshire for children and families through a Family Hub Network with partners, including the voluntary, community and faith sector to provide a range of services and a primary hub in each locality including continued delivery of existing support and developing new co-delivered support, developing outreach and 'pop up' sites in existing community locations so that all families can access support in their local neighbourhood.

The 0–19 Public Health Nursing Service

Oxfordshire’s integrated 0–19 Public Health Nursing Service brings together health visiting, school health nursing and the Family Nurse Partnership into a single pathway with one point of access. Eleven locality teams operate across the county, providing coordinated support as children grow.

Families are offered the Healthy Child Programme contacts from pregnancy through to age five. These include antenatal support, new birth visits, reviews at 6–8 weeks, 1 year and 2–2½ years, and a new universal 4 year review to support health, development and school readiness.

Health visiting teams also provide targeted and specialist support where vulnerabilities are identified and run group-based support such as infant feeding groups, baby drop-ins and ‘Marvellous Me’ sessions to promote confidence, emotional wellbeing and early relationships.

The Family Nurse Partnership provides intensive, evidence-based support for eligible young parents from early pregnancy until their child’s second birthday. This is complemented by an integrated young parent pathway, with family nurses offering specialist leadership and support for families with more complex or multiple needs.

The service works closely with Home Start, a national charity providing volunteer-led, nonjudgemental peer support for families with children under five. This partnership strengthens early help and prevention by offering practical and emotional support alongside statutory health services.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to increasing the uptake of health visitor checks for all families and supporting families to know and use the services available in our Family Hubs and through the Family Hub Network.

Family Help through our Family Hub Network and Family Hubs

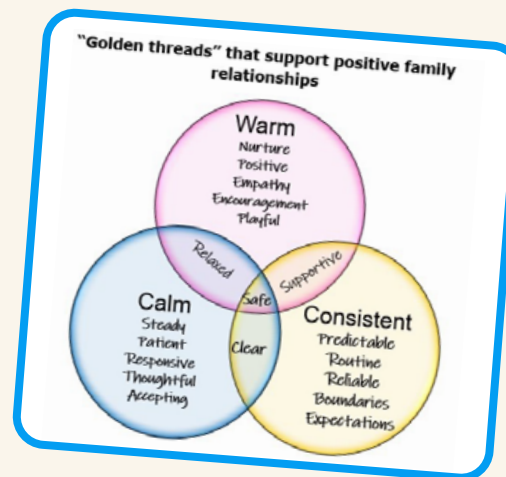
Family Help is a key part of Oxfordshire’s Best Start in Life approach, providing whole family, strengths-based support when children or parents are experiencing difficulties.

Family Help works alongside families where children may be affected by issues such as poverty, parental mental health needs, trauma, domestic abuse or other pressures.



Family Help practitioners work in a relational, trauma-informed and restorative way. Support is consent-based and focuses on building on family strengths, improving day-to-day family life.

Support may include purposeful home visiting, direct work with children, coordination of plans through a lead professional role, and helping families connect with local community support. Family Help teams also deliver group-based parenting programmes that support parents to build confidence, skills and positive relationships and can



signpost parents for additional support through partnerships with voluntary support groups such as Home Start.

These include evidence-based programmes focused on nurturing parenting, understanding children’s development and behaviour, strengthening parent-child relationships, supporting parents of teenagers, and helping parents affected by conflict or trauma.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to increasing our offer of family support by working more closely with voluntary agencies local to where families live, offering additional parenting support programmes and offering a range of home learning resources to support families build on their strengths and support each child to achieve a Good Level of Development.

Libraries and early learning

Oxfordshire's network of 45 libraries is a core part of the Best Start in Life offer. Libraries are welcoming, inclusive community spaces that support families from birth onwards and play an important role in early language, literacy and social connection.

Through local libraries, families can access early years programme development and the expansion of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in key locations, helping children develop a love of books and reading from an early age. Book Start book packs for babies, weekly rhyme time and story time sessions that support language development, Stay and Play activities in targeted areas, and milestone events such as World Book Day, Baby Week and the Summer Reading Challenge.

Libraries also host a wide range of creative and cultural activities for children and families, including Lego clubs, chess clubs, coding clubs, author events and creative workshops.



These activities support learning, confidence, social skills and community connection, libraries support literacy, learning and wellbeing, with benefits that can last throughout a child's life.

As part of the Best Start in Life Plan, we are committed to expanding access to books and early reading events with partners through access to libraries and through the Family Hubs and Family Hubs Network to all babies and children.



Voluntary, community and faith sector groups

Oxfordshire works in partnership with voluntary, community, and faith groups who offer a range of different services and support to families. This includes information and advice, guiding people to appropriate resources, running stay-and-play sessions, and offering more specialised support like one-on-one help

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to strengthening our working with the VCFS sector to develop and enhance the offer to babies, children and families.

Family Information Service (website)

The Family Information Service website offers comprehensive resources and support for children, young people, and families residing in Oxfordshire. This freely accessible platform provides detailed information regarding local services available within the community.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to improving our digital information offer for families and partners to deliver Family Hubs information directly to families in an accessible format.

Parks and open spaces

Oxfordshire parks and play areas offer a mix of quiet areas and high energy spaces for babies and children with their families to enjoy being outside together in nature and for meeting spaces with friends, with some being fully inclusive and with sensory specific equipment. Open spaces and play areas support babies and children with their physical development and health, with social skills, cognitive development and learning through creative imaginative play. For families they provide opportunities for bonding and having fun and are good for everyone's mental well-being.

As part of the Best Start in Life Plan, we are committed to ensuring more parks and play areas are accessible for children and families, whatever their needs.

Leisure centres

Children thrive when they can be active, whether involved in specific sports or in joining in with their families and care givers. Being active supports physical health and also promotes language, social and emotional development. There are a range of leisure centres delivered by district council partners, which provide access to families to engage in a range of different play and recreational activities.

As well as leisure centres, Active Oxfordshire delivers YouMove, free and low-cost activities for eligible children and their families, including those on benefits related free school meals or Universal Credit, refugee children, and children supported by early help services in Oxfordshire, enabling babies and children to stay active and have fun along the way.

As part of the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to working with the leisure centres as part of our Family Hubs Network to support babies and children, with their families to access and enjoy leisure facilities.

Oxfordshire County Music Service

We recognise the importance of music in the holistic development of babies and children in supporting their development of speech, language and communication, emotional, social and physical skills and in supporting strong attachments with parents and care givers, which contribute to children achieving a Good Level of Development. Music is fun and Oxfordshire County Music Service has an early years music strategy and offers whole-class music lessons for early years as part of the wider curriculum support offer to schools and delivers one-off, bespoke music workshops in schools. Children and families have benefitted from community music projects in schools and settings.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to expanding music into all Family Hubs and through the Family Hub Network and extend the current offer to settings and schools to ensure every child has an opportunity to take part in sessions so music can support improved outcomes.

Access to childcare

From September 2025, working families who meet the eligibility criteria have been able to access up to 30 funded hours per week for children from nine months. 97% of eligible working parents of two year olds have accessed this offer and just over 95% of eligible parents of three and four year olds are accessing childcare.

However there remain some geographic areas within the county who have limited childcare options. The Family Information Service supports families with finding appropriate childcare and accessing the eligible childcare entitlements.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to securing childcare for all children and families and improving access for those children whose families are receiving additional support or through our Family Hub Networks.

Early Years SEND service

The Early Years SEND is a countywide Special Educational Needs and Disability advisory support service for children with special educational needs under 5 years. The service works with children under 5 years, either known to or waiting to be seen by a community paediatrician, who need additional support with their development and learning. Specialist teachers offer individual support and advice to parents, carers and family, and work with the child's setting on to support the child's individual needs and unique circumstances.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to ensuring access to specialist support is available to all families and settings to ensure children's needs are identified early and to support settings and families to work together to support those needs.

Quality Early Years Education

96% of Early Years Providers are judged good or better by Ofsted compared to 91% nationally, giving confidence that practice and provision is good in most of our early years education settings (Ofsted statistics: 1 September 2024 to 31 March 2025).

The early years quality team provide support and guidance to all early years providers (childminders, preschools, day nurseries, nursery schools and all other schools) through quality improvement visits which support leadership, teaching and access to high quality training and resources. Additional targeted support is offered where identified following Ofsted and to settings with low Good Level of Development outcomes.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to working to increase all Early Years Providers are meeting expected standards and that Good Level of Development outcomes in line with our ambitious local revised target.

Delivering on our vision

The following section outlines how the system will be coordinated to deliver on the Best Start in Life Plan.

Voice of families

In the Best Start in Life Plan, we will make sure the voices of babies, children and families are at the heart of how we design, deliver and improve our work. We will build their perspectives into our governance structures, create regular and accessible ways for families to share their experiences, and ensure their feedback directly shapes decisions.

Using a mix of approaches, including working with the voluntary, community and faith sectors, we will hear from a wide range of families and communities. Most importantly, we will act on what they tell us, so that services feel relevant, responsive and built around their needs, driving continuous improvement across the whole early years system.

Governance

The Best Start in Life Plan will report to the **Children's Trust Board**, which will hold overall responsibility for monitoring the performance and impact of the plan. Updates will be provided quarterly.

To support this, a **Best Start in Life Plan Steering Group** will be responsible for prioritising the plan, tracking progress, and addressing any risks or issues. The steering group will also ensure oversight of the combined budget and make recommendations on funding allocation to the appropriate boards.

Delivery of the Best Start in Life Plan will take place through the **Oxfordshire Education Partnership, Early Years Board, and Early Help and Prevention Board**, with progress and outcomes ultimately reported back to the steering group and Children's Trust Board and to the **Health and Wellbeing Board**.

Shared commissioning of services

We ensure a clear core offer in all Family Hubs and to provide local targeted Best Start in Life offer for family support and for those children who are identified as not achieving their Good Level of Development. We will jointly commission with partners where additional services are identified by need.

Our key measure of success will be the Good Level of Development

A Good Level of Development (GLD) is the Statutory Assessment at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) when children are in Reception classes¹.

Impact measures by 2028

% of children with a Good Level of Development at 5-years-old

Local revised Target 79.8%
DfE local target - 77.8%

% difference between the proportion of children eligible or not eligible for Free School Meals achieving a Good Level of Development

Local Revised target 59.8%
DfE target – 50.8%

¹ Children are assessed against the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) which are part of the Early Years Curriculum and support teachers to make a holistic, best fit judgement about a child's development and their readiness for year 1.

High level Best Start in Life Plan, March 2026 to March 2027

For all babies, children and families to have:

■ **Healthy beginnings:**

1. Work with partners to ensure that we have a clear offer to identify and support parental wellbeing, as well as parent-infant relationships
2. Work with partners to increase up the uptake of the health visitor checks, for 2-2.5 years and Oxfordshire's 4-year-old check
3. Improve our offer of information of support for dads and male carers
4. Ensure young parents can access the support they need

■ **Strong foundations:**

5. Open five primary Family Hubs across Oxfordshire
6. Develop and publish a clear offer for each Family Hub locality

7. Offer proven, high-quality parenting and home learning programmes that help children and families learn and develop well

8. Ensure that we have an effective system in place, in line with national guidance, to keep families safe

■ **Access to high-quality early years learning:**

9. Increase Free School Meal entitlement take-up, by developing auto-enrolment
10. Increase uptake of 15-hour childcare entitlement for families receiving additional or universal support
11. Increase childcare sufficiency for 9 months to 23 months and for under 3 places in identified areas of need
12. Support those schools with low Good Level of Development scores or where additional need is identified
13. To continue enhancing inclusivity within Early Years Settings for all children, building upon the existing work and progress already underway

■ **To strengthen our Best Start in Life offer:**

14. Strengthen partnerships and networks across health, education, social care and the voluntary, community and faith sector
15. Develop of a Best Start in Life workforce training offer
16. Develop our digital information offer
17. Use our data to better inform our understanding on Good Level of Development
18. Use our Oxfordshire Marmot County status to engage wider partners including research partners and local businesses to raise the awareness of the importance of the Best Start in Life

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EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

26 June 2026

Best Start Family Hubs in Oxfordshire

Report by the Director of Children's Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to**
 - a) note the Council's strategic direction of travel for Best Start Family Hubs in Oxfordshire.

Executive Summary

2. This report sets out the proposed strategic direction for the development of Best Start Family Hubs (BSFHs) in Oxfordshire, as a core delivery mechanism for the council's Best Start in Life Plan. The Best Start in Life Plan responds to the national ambition for 75% of children to achieve a good level of development (GLD) by age five by 2028. While Oxfordshire is currently performing well, disparities remain for children eligible for free school meals. The council has therefore adopted a more ambitious revised local targets to both improve overall attainment and reduce inequalities.
3. Best Start Family Hubs are a central component of this approach. They will provide welcoming, inclusive and accessible spaces offering integrated support to families from pregnancy through to age 19 (or 25 for those with SEND). The core offer will include the delivery of parenting and home learning environment programmes (including play and learn type sessions), support for children with additional needs and a healthy baby offer.
4. The strategic direction of Best Start Family Hubs will see five localities, aligned to the District and City Council footprint, with a primary Best Start Family Hub in each, which will have the responsibility for delivering the core offer, in line with the Department for Education (DfE) requirements. Within each locality, there will be a network of Best Start Family Hub Network sites, that could be delivered by partners, including VCFSE organisations (Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise) or the Local Authority, which will deliver at least one of the core services regularly.

5. To support VCFSE organisations in the delivery of these services, it is proposed that a grant-based funding programme is developed to better support the sector involvement in delivering the core offer in line with the requirements, including parenting programmes, play and learning activities and outreach.
6. In addition, the development of Best Start Family Hubs will align closely with the existing Youth Offer, including the emerging Youth Partnerships, to support a more integrated 0–19 (or 25) offer. This will ensure continuity of support from early childhood through adolescence and create more joined-up pathways for families.

Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life Plan

7. In July 2025, government published the Giving every child the best start in life strategy. This is the government's strategy for improving child development and meeting the ambition that 75% of 5-year-olds in England have a good level of development (GLD) by 2028. The strategy has three core priorities:
 - a. Improving family services, providing high-quality support to parents and children from pregnancy to age 5.
 - b. More accessible early education and childcare.
 - c. Improving quality in early years including reception.
8. To meet the National ambition of 75% of 5-year-olds to achieve a good level of development, each local authority has been given a local target. For Oxfordshire these are:
 - a. All eligible children 77.8% (Oxfordshire 2025 outcome 70% (2% above National))
 - b. All free school meal (FSM) eligible children 50.8% (Oxfordshire 2025 Outcome 43% (7% below national))
9. Whilst the Council recognise the challenges of the national targets, the Council does not feel this is ambitious enough or that 1 in 4 children are not achieving GLD who are eligible for FSM is acceptable. Therefore, our approach has also included setting out revised local targets (RLT) to bring us in line with National performance and above the set local targets in 2026. Our revised local targets are therefore;
 - a. All eligible children 79.8% (2% above Local Target)
 - b. All free school meal eligible children 59.8% (9% above Local Target)
10. As part of achieving this vision, we have published a Best Start in Life Plan, which sets out how we will achieve our Good Level of Development target. The plan for Oxfordshire was developed based on our existing Early Years Strategy and Early Help and Prevention Strategy.

11. The Best Start in Life plan sets out a clear vision that every child has the best start in life, and parents, parents-to-be, babies and young children have what they need to thrive.
12. Through achieving this vision, it will mean that all babies, children and families are safe, learning, happy, healthy and engaged.
13. The plan sets out four key priorities to achieving this vision:
 - a. **Healthy beginnings** - We will focus awareness raising of the importance of pregnancy and early childhood across all organisations in Oxfordshire and ensure additional support for families where this is needed.
 - b. **Strong foundations** - We will focus on working with partners to deliver coordinated support through Family Hubs and the wider Family Hub Network, including a range of parenting programmes, and resources to support home learning, supporting families to stay safe and nurturing positive early relationships and supporting babies and children to learn.
 - c. **High-quality early years learning** - We will focus on ensuring that all children can fully participate, achieve, and feel supported in the environments where they grow and develop. To support children to thrive and learn, we will invest in a strong and well-trained workforce and champion inclusive practice across the early years system.
 - d. **Strengthen our Best Start in Life Offer** - We will focus on working together across services and with families through our Family Hub Network and Family Hubs to continue to develop a wider Best Start in Life offer which is available when families need support local to where they live. We will share our data and use this to identify what families need and where they need it.

Best Start Family Hubs (BSFHs)

14. As outlined in our Best Start Plan, the development and implementation of Best Start Family Hubs will be a key in achieving the Council's revised local target and outcome for babies, children, young people and families.
15. Best Start Family Hubs (BSFHs) will offer welcoming, inclusive, environments where every family feels valued and confident to ask for support. BSFHs will be open to all families with children aged 0–19 (or up to 25 for young people with SEND). While universally accessible, they will prioritise support for families with babies and young children, due to the critical time for cognitive, physical and emotional development.
16. At the core of our offer, in line with Government criteria, the Hubs will provide supportive parenting advice, stay and play activities, help with children's learning and development at home, preventative and universal health services

– especially for babies and their families – and early support for children with additional needs.

17. As well as the core offer, the BSFHs will offer holistic support tailored to the needs of the local communities and families and will ensure they are connected into the wider community offer, including, but not limited to, welfare advice, debt advice, early help, and help for those at risk of, or experiencing, domestic abuse.

Work to Date

18. In 2025 the Council commenced a programme looking at the potential for developing Family Hubs in Oxfordshire. The programme followed four key stages:
 - a. Scoping and analysis - The aim of this stage was to understand the need for and potential impact of Family Hubs in the county.
 - b. Strategic leadership - The aim of this stage was to develop the multi-agency strategic leadership for Family Hubs and work with the range of partners, including families & young people, to develop our shared understanding of need and vision and approach going forwards.
 - c. Implementation - This stage is to implement the model / approach identified in the previous stage.
 - d. Delivery and review - At this stage the aim would be to deliver the Family Hubs and to review, on an ongoing basis, opportunities to further develop and improve the offer to meet the changing needs of the county
19. As part of the scoping and analysis stage, the focus was on understanding the needs of families in the county and identifying ways of working and opportunities with partners and other key stakeholders. This has included:
 - a. Benchmarking of other Family Hubs
 - b. High level population analysis
 - c. Children's Social Care Research (using the last 4 years of data)
 - d. The Local Policy Lab research – Case Study.
20. As part of the scoping and analysis phase, engagement with a wide range of external stakeholders took place to learn more about key stakeholders and their priorities, ways of working and risks, and issues. The findings of this have been weaved into the direction of travel for the Programme.
21. As part of the Strategic Leadership stage, a multi-agency Programme Board was established. This board brings together partners from across health, education, social care, and the VCFSE to help shape the strategic direction of travel.

Vision and Ways of Working for Best Start Family Hubs

22. The vision for Family Hubs is that there is a network of provision across Oxfordshire for children and families to ensure their needs are met, which is underpinned by:
 - a. Access
 - b. Connection
 - c. Relationships.

23. This vision is underpinned by the following ways of working:
 - a. Babies, children, young people, parents and families will be at the centre of our work – In Oxfordshire, the development of Best Start Family Hubs will be shaped around the lived experience, strengths and needs of babies, children, young people, parents and families.
 - b. Partnership – Best Start Family Hubs in Oxfordshire will be developed and delivered through strong partnership working across the council, health, education, early years, social care, the VCFSE, and with families themselves. This means building a shared understanding of local need, agreeing common priorities, and working together to design and provide joined-up support around children and families.
 - c. Needs led – The development of Family Hubs will be shaped by a clear understanding of the needs of babies, children, young people and families across Oxfordshire, recognising that these needs vary between communities and over time. Services and support will be informed by data, local insight, evidence and engagement with families and partners, so that the offer reflects what matters most locally.
 - d. Outcome focused – An outcome-focused approach will help ensure that activity is purposeful, that resources are aligned to priorities, and that services make a demonstrable difference to the lives of families.
 - e. Sustainable – The Family Hubs model in Oxfordshire will be designed with long-term sustainability in mind, building on existing strengths, relationships and community assets. This will include making best use of available resources, embedding new ways of working into existing systems where appropriate, and ensuring that the model can adapt over time in response to changing needs, evidence and funding contexts.

- f. High quality – Best Start Family Hubs will be underpinned by a commitment to high-quality, welcoming and inclusive support that families can trust and access with confidence.

Strategic direction of travel

24. To achieve the vision and intended outcomes for babies, children, young people and families, and in light of the findings of the scoping and analysis stage, it is proposed that the Council develops five Family Hub Localities, with a primary Best Start Family Hub (BSFH) within each locality.
25. These localities will align with District and City Council boundaries and bring together the network of partners supporting babies, children, young people and families in each area. The locality networks will create a shared understanding of need and draw on the full range of services and expertise to shape robust, high-quality local provision.
26. The primary BSFHs will deliver the core offer in line with government criteria and will be led and staffed by the County Council. The proposed locations for the primary Best Start Family Hubs are:
 - a. Wantage / Grove area
 - b. Didcot area
 - c. Banbury area
 - d. Witney area
 - e. Blackbird Leys - Cuddesdon Corner (already operational)
27. The Council recognises that within the preferred locations for the primary BSFHs there will already be a range of provision provided by partners, including the VCFSE. Where this is identified, the Council will work closely with those partners to reduce duplication and explore options for co-delivery.
28. In line with the government requirements, across each locality we will have a number of Best Start Family Network Sites. These sites could be delivered by the Local Authority or partners, including the VCFSE, and will deliver at least one regular core service, such as a parenting programme, play and learn sessions.
29. We also recognise that for many different reasons not all parents and families will access a Best Start Family Hub or Network site, so outreach to engage families in their home or more familiar community settings will be key. As part of this offer, we will strengthen and expand our digital provision to develop a digital Family Hub offer. This offer will improve access to information about local

services and make it easier for families to use online support, including parenting and home-learning environment programmes.

Best Start Family Hubs and VCFSE

30. Oxfordshire has a thriving VCFSE sector, with a diverse range of organisations providing services and support across different ages. With the development of our Best Start in Life Plan and our focus on developing partnerships with the VCFSE, the Council will be providing £0.500m per annum for three years to develop infrastructure and services for the VCFSE. The Council proposes that this funding is utilised for infrastructure development and a grants-based programmes.
31. The aim of the infrastructure support would be to complement our existing infrastructure by providing increased support and coordination to those VCFSE working in the Early Years. The vision is that the Strategic Infrastructure Support will be able to support with:
 - a. Mapping and engaging the VCFSE
 - b. Ensuring that the VCFSE are kept up to date and engaged in national and local policy development
 - c. Support in workforce development
 - d. Ensuring there is a clear feedback loop between the VCFSE and Oxfordshire County Council.
32. The grant-based programme will support VCFSE organisations to deliver services in line with the Best Start Family Hub requirements and would need to be aligned to the following priority areas:
 - a. Locality and place-based – A key aim of Best Start Family Hubs is to improve the good level of development for children. We therefore need to ensure that we are targeting this funding to the areas where this will make the greatest impact, such as in the rural areas.
 - b. Workforce development – To support with the ongoing sustainability of VCFSE partners we need to ensure that the funding has a strong focus on workforce development that will help to strengthen the current provision and offer to families (i.e. funding for training).
 - c. Evidence-based approach – We want to ensure that the offer to families is evidence-based, and that we are maximising every interaction. For example, in stay and play sessions, we want to ensure that organisers are adopting evidence and research-based approach in the development of the sessions, so that sessions promote bonding, speech and language development, etc.
 - d. Parenting and Home-Learning Environment Programmes – As part of the Department for Education requirements, we have a requirement to

deliver parenting and home-learning environment programmes, however, we want to ensure that across the partnership we are working together to offer a consistent offer

33. To ensure that we are aligned to the Department for Education requirements and our local priorities, the grant funding would be for the following areas:
 - a. Funding to deliver Parenting & Home-Learning Environment Programmes (in line with our local menu of interventions)
 - b. Expansion of play and learn sessions
 - c. Outreach
 - d. Seed / innovation funding
34. The grant would be open to all VCFSE organisations, including community run children's centres, to submit expressions of interest.
35. It should be noted that through engagement with VCFSE there have been questions about the future direction of travel regarding the leasing of County Council properties. It is anticipated that these will be addressed through the development of the Council's Community Asset Transfer (CAT) and Community Leasing policies. These policies seek to recognise and maximise the benefits of the devolution of assets to local communities. It seeks to do this by transferring the ownership or leasing OCC owned properties to community groups in recognition of the social value that they generate. These policies underwent an engagement period February – March 2026 and were approved at Cabinet on 21st April 2026.
36. The two policies are as follows:
 - a. Community Asset Transfer is about transferring the ownership of land or buildings from OCC to a community organisation at less than "best consideration" – that is less than full market value – in order to achieve a public benefit.
 - b. Community Leasing follows the same principles but refers to the leasing of land or buildings at less than best consideration, in order to achieve a public benefit.

Best Start Family Hubs and Youth Services

37. In December 2025, the national government published a ten-year youth strategy. This strategy aims to tackle the challenges for this generation of young people and ensure every young person can thrive.
38. As part of the delivery of this strategy, the government is planning to open 50 new Youth Futures Hubs (of which 8 Local Authorities have received funding –

Oxfordshire County Council has not received this funding). The ambition is that these hubs will deliver a blend of open access youth work, providing safe, welcoming spaces for all young people, and targeted support for those who may need more focused help. They will also act as single points for partnership working, bringing together organisations across community safety, careers and employability services, DWP Youth Hubs, mental health provision, and a wide range of voluntary and community sector partners to offer coordinated, wraparound support.

39. As well as the Youth Future Hub programme, the DCMS has developed a Local Youth Transformation Pilot. This is a national programme to rebuild a high-quality needs-led youth offer. It aims to re-establish local leadership in youth services and ensure young people's voices are central to decision making. It supports the direction of the national Youth Strategy which states that services should be shaped around local need, strengths and context, rather than a single, one-size-fits-all model.
40. Oxfordshire County Council was successful in an expression of interest for the first round of the Local Youth Transformation Pilot. As part of this, Oxfordshire County Council received funding to develop Youth Partnerships across the county, Youth Voice Strategy and a Youth Offer data dashboard.
41. The DCMS have advised that guidance may become available in Autumn 2026 in relation to future funding.
42. Local Youth Partnerships are now in place (or being set up) in every District and City Council, which is in line with the Family Hub locality footprints, bringing together the council, voluntary and community sector organisations, education, health and other partners including businesses, around shared priorities for young people. Each Youth Partnership has developed its own way of working, structures and leadership to reflect local priorities of demographics, existing provision and local capacity.
43. These partnerships support services to work together more effectively by coordinating activity, reducing duplication, and strengthening local decision-making. Leadership varies by area.

Best Start Family Hubs and Youth Partnerships

44. In line with government expectations, the Council is committed to strengthening the integration between Best Start Family Hubs and Youth Services, ensuring that children, young people and families can seamlessly access the right support at the right time.
45. Best Start Family Hubs will operate as part of a connected local system, where staff are equipped to confidently identify need and support families to navigate both universal and targeted youth provision. This includes enabling Youth

Services to flexibly utilise Family Hub spaces to deliver targeted interventions, such as 1:1 support, within community-based settings.

46. The alignment of Youth Partnerships with the Best Start Family Hub locality footprint provides a strong foundation to develop a coherent 0–19 (or up to 25 for those with SEND) offer. This approach supports a more joined-up pathway from early childhood through adolescence, improving continuity of support and strengthening outcomes for families.
47. The work currently being undertaken with youth partnerships also builds upon the wider place model and enables universal delivery to be coordinated via VCFSE as part of the council's statutory duty.

Delivering on The Strategic Ambitions

48. The Department for Education is providing three years of grant funding to support the development and delivery of Best Start Family Hubs nationally. Oxfordshire County Council has been allocated £5.529m of DfE grant funding across 2026/27 to 2028/29. This is profiled as £1.735m in 2026/27, £1.876m in 2027/28 and £1.918m in 2028/29. In addition, Oxfordshire County Council is providing a further £0.500m per annum to support delivery, creating a total confirmed funding envelope of £7.029m over the three years. Of this grant funding approximately £125k per annum is for capital expenditure only.
49. The DfE grant must be used in accordance with the grant conditions and the eligible expenditure criteria. A key condition is that the grant is the Council allocates funding across the different strands, which are programme development, parenting programmes, home learning programmes, support for children with additional needs and capital funding. The proposed spend profile will be developed to ensure that expenditure remains aligned to these categories and that the Council can evidence compliance with the grant requirements.
50. The funding available will support the development of five Best Start Family Hub localities, each with a primary Best Start Family Hub and the wider Best Start Family Hub Network Sites. Investment will be focused on delivering the required core offer, including parenting and home learning environment programmes, play and learn activity, outreach, and support for children with additional needs.
51. Financial oversight will be provided through the programme governance arrangements, with regular monitoring of spend, forecast expenditure, grant compliance and delivery progress. The Council will also meet DfE reporting requirements in relation to spend and delivery.
52. Performance monitoring will be developed alongside financial monitoring to ensure that the Council can demonstrate that the grant investment is achieving the required deliverables and contributing to the intended outcomes. This will include monitoring delivery activity, take-up, reach and delivery of the core offer.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

53. The Children and Young People's Plan set out a vision of "Every child and young person will have the best possible start in life, the county will be a great place to grow up in, and children and young people will have opportunities to become everything they want to be. These life chances will be reflected equally across our rural and urban communities." As part of the plan, priority areas were identified, including providing help and support across the system at the earliest opportunity.
54. In Autumn 2024 the Early Help and Prevention Strategy was approved by the Children's Trust Board. The Early Help and Prevention Strategy in Oxfordshire is a comprehensive, multi-agency framework designed to ensure children, young people, and families receive timely and effective support before needs escalate.
55. As well as an Early Help and Prevention Board, an Early Years Strategy was approved by the Children's Trust Board in April 2024. The Early Years Strategy sets out how we will work together across the Early Years system to give all babies and children the start in life they deserve.
56. The Council has partnered with the UCL Institute of Health Equity to become a Marmot Place. This means the Council has committed to tackling health inequalities and improving health fairness in Oxfordshire by working with local partners across the system. These include local authorities, communities, public services, businesses, and voluntary and community sector organisations. The initial areas of focus for the Marmot Programme are to: give every child the best start in life, creating a fair employment and good work for all and ensuring a healthy standard of living for all.

Financial Implications

57. The Plan is expected to be funded by a combination of existing budget allocations and Best Start Family Hubs grant allocations from the Department for Education.

Comments checked by:

Lewis Gosling, Finance Business Partner (Children's Social Care)

Legal Implications

58. There are no significant legal implications arising from this report.

Craig Cochrane, Principal Solicitor, Child Care Team, Law and Governance,

Staff Implications

59. The Council is also reviewing how staff can be aligned to the Best Start Family Hub model and how existing services can be prioritised for delivery through these spaces.

Comments checked by:

Amy Warner, Strategic People Partner HR and Culture Change Team,

Equality & Inclusion Implications

60. An Equalities Impact Assessment is currently being drafted and to date has not identified any negative impacts. This assessment will continue to be reviewed at key milestones of the programme.

Sustainability Implications

61. A Climate Impact Assessment will be completed as part of the further development of the programme to ensure there is sufficient information to understand the implications.

Risk Management

62. The multi-agency Programme Board will be responsible for the identification, mitigation and monitoring of risks and issues to the delivery of Family Hub Networks across Oxfordshire. Where risks are required to be escalated, this will be to the Early Help and Prevention Board.

Lisa Lyons
Director of Children's Services

Annex: Oxfordshire's Best Start Family Hubs

Background papers: Nil

Contact Officer: Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services

Delia Mann, Deputy Director Children's Social Care,

Sophie Black, Assistant Director Early Help Prevention ,

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Oxfordshire's Best Start Family Hubs

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June 2026

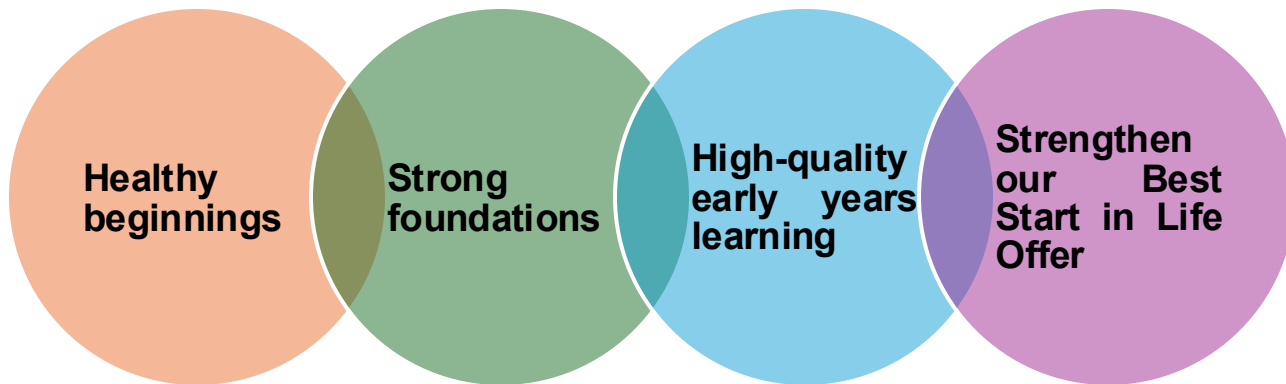


**OXFORDSHIRE
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Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life Plan

- In July 2025, government published the **Giving every child the best start in life strategy**. This is the government's strategy for **improving child development** and meeting the ambition that 75% of 5-year-olds in England have a good level of development (GLD) by 2028.
- As part of achieving the national target, each Local Authority has been given a local target for good level of development. In Oxfordshire it has been decided that we needed to have more ambitious targets, and therefore revised local targets (RLT) have been set to bring us in line with national performance and above the set local targets in 2026. Our revised local targets are therefore;
 - **All eligible children 79.8% (2% above Local Target)**
 - **All free school meal eligible children 59.8% (9% above Local Target)**
- Our Best Start in Life Plan sets out four priority areas

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Best Start Family Hubs

Best Start Family Hubs will be key in helping to achieve our local target and outcomes for babies, children, young people and families.

What are Best Start Family Hubs (BSFHs)?

Best Start Family Hubs (BSFHs) offer welcoming, inclusive, environments where every family feels valued and confident to ask for support. BSFHs will be open to all families with children aged 0–19 (or up to 25 for young people with SEND). While universally accessible, they will prioritise support for families with babies and young children, due to the critical time for cognitive, physical and emotional development.

At the core of our offer, in line with Government criteria, the hubs will provide supportive parenting advice, stay and play activities, help with children's learning and development at home, preventative and universal health services – especially for babies and their families – and early support for children with additional needs.

As well as the core offer, the BSFHs will offer holistic support to families and will ensure they are connected into the wider community offer, including, but not limited to, welfare advice, debt advice, early help, and help for those at risk of, or experiencing, domestic abuse.



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Best Start Family Hubs

The Best Start Family Hub Programme launched in 2025 with a range of activity completed to date

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Best Start Family Hubs

The key next steps are:

Cuddesdon Corner

- Onboarding of Phase 1 staffing (Family Hub Practitioner roles)
- Development of summer offer
- Development of core and wider offer
- Mobilisation of parenting & home learning environment programmes

Primary Best Start Family Hubs

- Phase 1 Staffing offer for the four sites developed
- Phase 2 of staffing implemented
- Buildings confirmed and upgrades completed
- Development of core offer

Best Start Family Hub Network sites

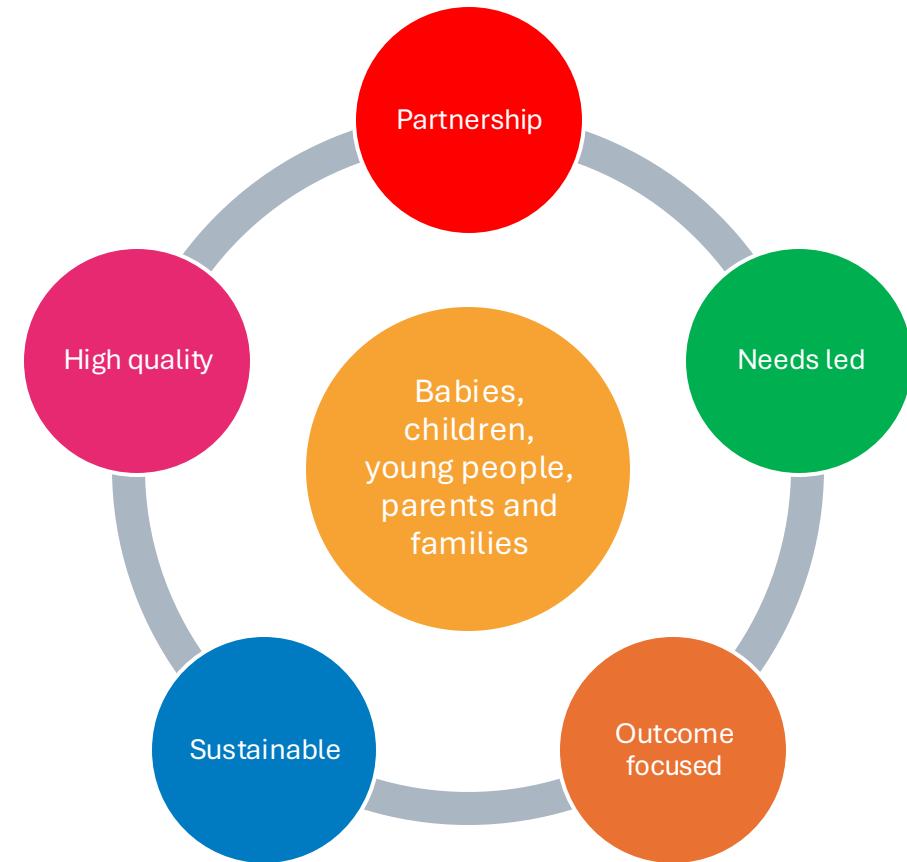
- Identification of core offer requirements to inform grant process
- Development of grant process for VCFSE, including quality and reporting standards

Other key areas

- Digital offer development (initial Phase 1 on OCC website and FIS)
- Workforce development strategy
- Outreach plan
- Monitoring & review data

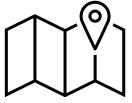
Vision for Best Start Family Hubs

- The vision for Family Hubs is that there is a network of provision across Oxfordshire for children and families to ensure their needs are met, which is underpinned by:
 - Access
 - Connection
 - Relationships
- This vision is underpinned by the following ways of working:



Strategic Direction of Travel

- The Oxfordshire County Council model for Family Hubs will include:



- **Localities** – These localities will bring partners together within the geographical footprint to ensure there is awareness of understanding of local services, developing an understanding of local need, and responding appropriately.



- **Best Start Family Hubs (Primary Hubs)** - These hubs will be the friendly and accessible places for families, where they can drop in for information, advice and signposting. A core offer will be provided, including services in relation to parenting & home learning environment programmes, services for children with additional needs and an offer for babies. Staff will ensure there is a warm referral to other local services, if required (such as youth service, benefit information).



- **Network sites** – These will be sites, either delivered by the Local Authority or the partners, which regularly deliver core services, such a play and learn, parenting and / or home learning environment programmes



- **Outreach** – For families that may be less likely to engage in a Hub or Network site, across each locality an outreach plan will developed to identify the key cohorts of families and how they can engage in the offers of support available.

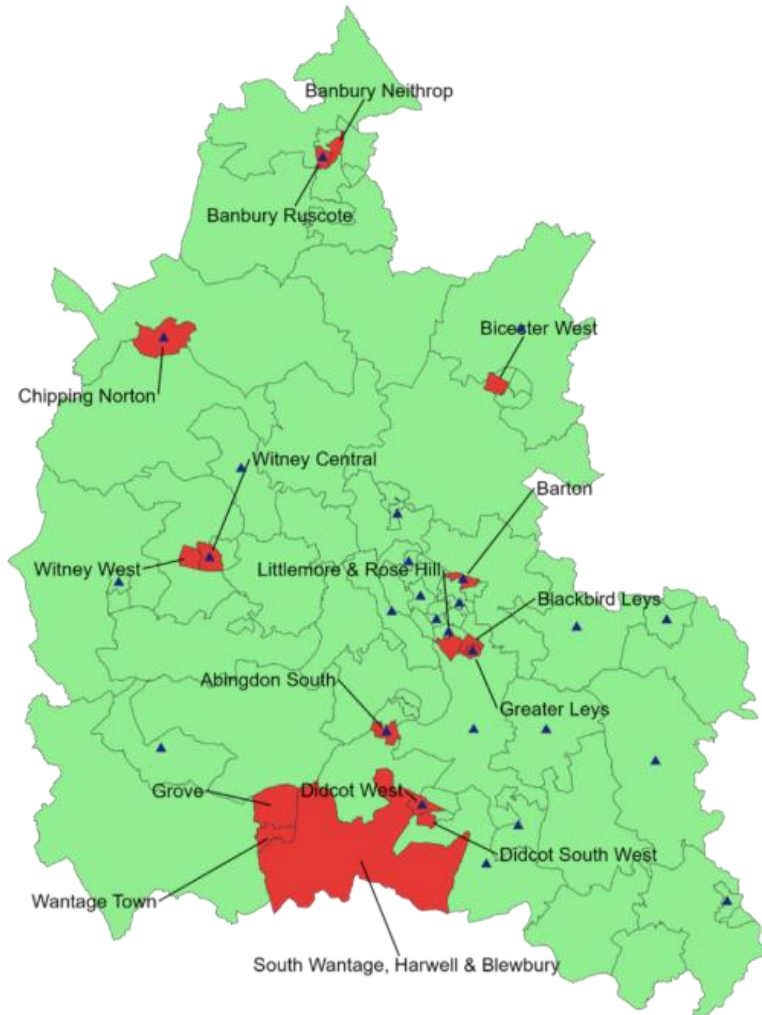


- **Digital** - The digital offer will provide families information on key topics, as well as links to local services. In time this will also include the delivery of key services, such as parenting and home learning environment programmes, information sessions and workshops

Strategic Direction of Travel

Priority Areas Identified Across Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, Children's Social Care, and Early Help Datasets

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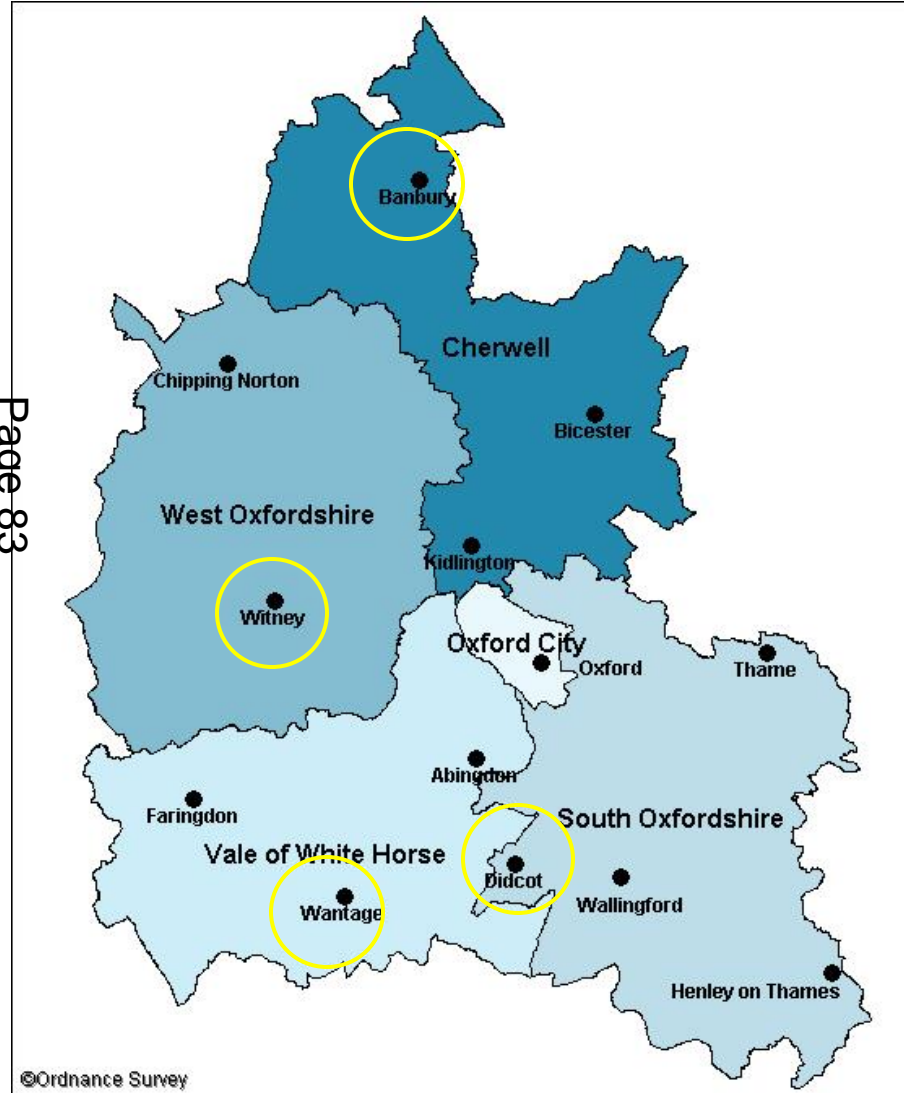


- As part of the scoping and analysis stage, research was undertaken to understand more about the Children's Social Care data. The study used four years of administrative data (2020–2024) from the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), Early Help services, and Children's Statutory Services (CSC) to assess patterns of vulnerability and service engagement. A decision-analytic framework was applied to map family pathways through the social care system and identify key intervention points.
- The MSOAs highlighted in red represent the top 16 areas with significantly higher levels of need. These were identified based on the volume of prevalence rate to MASH, referrals signposted to community services, and escalations to Early Help and Children Statutory services.
- The MSOA areas with blue markers indicating the availability of children's centres
- The following MSOAs: Abingdon South, Banbury Neithrop, Banbury Ruscote, Barton, Bicester West, Blackbird Leys, Didcot West, Greater Leys, Grove, Littlemore & Rose Hill, Witney Central, and Witney West, consistently emerged across all three datasets as areas of high need.



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Strategic Direction of Travel



- **Five Family Hub localities**

- These will follow the District Council footprint (West Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, Cherwell District Council and City of Oxford).

- **One Best Start Family Hub in each locality**

- One Best Start Family Hub (Primary Hub) will be in each of the localities.
- These locations were identified following the social care research and the population analysis.
- We will work with partners to ensure the physical space is fully utilised, including by partners.



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Strategic Direction of travel

The proposed buildings for the Best Start Family Hubs:

Locality	Location	Proposed primary Best Start Family Hubs
City		Cuddesdon Corner (Blackbird Leys Children & Family Centre)
Perwell	Banbury	Banbury Children and Family Centre
West Oxfordshire	Witney	Witney Children and Family Centre
South Oxfordshire	Didcot	Didcot Children and Family Centre
Vale of White Horse	Wantage / Grove	No building / site identified

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**OXFORDSHIRE
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BSFHs Core Offer

A Warm Welcome

All staff ensure every family feels welcomed, valued and confident to access support.

Navigation

Families are supported to navigate, connect and access the services they need.

Play & Learn

Engaging sessions delivered by practitioners and partners to connect families and support child development.

Parenting & HLE

Programmes focused on strengthening parenting skills and home learning, starting with 3–4 year olds.

Additional Needs Support

Inclusion Practitioners identify needs early and support improved developmental outcomes.

Healthy Baby Offer

Minimum offer supporting development reviews and connecting families to health services.

BSFHs Wider Offer



Wider services

As well as the Core Offer, the primary Best Start Family Hubs will provide the minimum offer for each of the following areas, and we will ensure that over the three years we will deliver against the go further options (as outlined by the Department for Education). The Financial and other assistance will be the priority area, to maximise the funding that has been allocated for Family Hubs from the Household Resilience Fund.

Services for children aged 5+ and young people

- Youth services – universal and targeted
- Youth justice services
- School attendance
- Holiday Activities and Food

Health and Wellbeing

- Health visiting (0-5)
- Public health (0-19)
- Mental health
- Maternity, midwifery and neonatal
- Nutrition and healthy growth
- Oral health improvement
- Screen time
- Smoking cessation
- Substance misuse support
- Vaccinations

Financial and other assistance

- Birth registration
- Debt advice, money and welfare advice
- Food support
- Fuel poverty
- Housing
- Parental leave and pay
- Social welfare advice services

Wider family support services

- Armed forces families
- Children affected by parental imprisonment
- Reducing parental conflict
- Support for adoptive, kinship and foster families
- Support for separated and separating parents/carers
- Targeted family support- family help

Safeguarding

- Domestic abuse
- Tackling child sexual abuse and exploitation

BSFHs and Parenting & HLE Programmes

- As part of the multi-agency Family Hub Programme Board, a task and finish group has been underway to identify the programmes that should be delivered within the BSFHs and Network Sites. The proposed programmes that have been identified for delivery are:

Home Learning Environment Programmes

- EasyPeasy (digital offer)
- Early Talk Boost
- PEEP Learning Together
- Raising Early Achievement in Literacy (REAL / Making it REAL)
- The Parenting Puzzle (Exemption request confirmed by DfE)
- Triple P Online

Parenting Programmes

- Triple P Online
- The Nurturing Programme (Exemption request confirmed by DfE)
- Keeping Your Child in Mind (parental separation/conflict)
- Empowering Families Empowering Communities (EPEC)
- Child-Parent Psychotherapy

BSFHs and digital offer

- The aim of the Best Start Family Hub Digital Offer will be to ensure that we are able to extend the support far beyond buildings and support families with navigating and finding the help they are need.
- We will need to ensure that the offer aligns with the national Best Start in Life offer to help provide a seamless journey for the families.

BSFHs and VCFSE

- Within Oxfordshire there is a diverse VCFSE providing support and services across a range of different ages.
- However, we recognise the VCFSE are increasingly experiencing barriers and issues to accessing funding for delivery of services. A key priority is ensuring that we strengthen the VCFSE and develop our relationships to extend the reach of high-quality services across the county and engaging key target populations.
- There are two keyways we are proposing we are able to move forward together

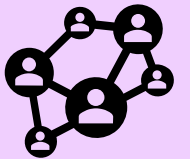
The Council also recognises that with the grant funding only being available for three years, we need to ensure that a key area of focus is supporting the VCFSE to continue to develop high quality services. Therefore, it is proposed that we provide funding for:

- Strategic infrastructure support – Funding and resource to an organisation (or consortium) that can proactively engage the wider VCFSE, support with communication, identify workforce development requirements and create capacity to engage in BSFH programme.
- Strategic locality leadership – A lead VCFSE in each locality to engage with the BSFH programme and provide clear communication and feedback with the wider VCFSE in the locality.



We develop a grant funding programme for the VCFSE (including community-run children's centres) for the delivery of the following services:

- Delivery of Parenting and Home Learning Environment Programmes
- Play and learn expansion
- Outreach
- Innovation/ seed funding

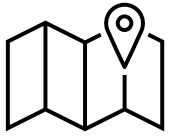


This grant funding opportunity would be open to all VCFSE organisations, including the community-run children centres.

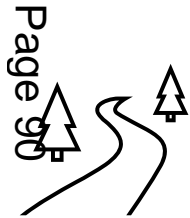


**OXFORDSHIRE
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BSFHs and Youth Services



- **Best Start Family Hubs role in navigating the youth offer** - Best Start Family Hubs will operate as part of a connected local system, where staff are equipped to confidently identify need and support families to navigate both universal and targeted youth provision. This includes enabling Youth Services to flexibly utilise Family Hub spaces to deliver targeted interventions, such as 1:1 support, within community-based settings.



- **Joined up pathway from 0-19 (or 25 with SEND)** - The alignment of Youth Partnerships with the Best Start Family Hub locality footprint provides a solid foundation to develop a coherent 0–19 (or up to 25 for those with SEND) offer. This approach supports a more joined-up pathway from early childhood through adolescence, improving continuity of support and strengthening outcomes for families.



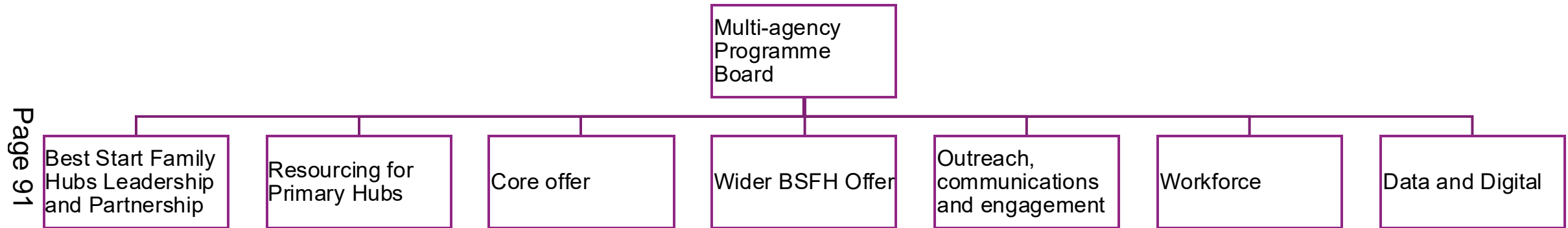
- **Shared footprints** - The work currently being undertaken with youth partnerships aligns with the same footprint as the localities for Best Start Family Hubs. This will provide the opportunity to strengthen the VCFSE in a joined-up way across the localities.



**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

Best Start Family Hub Programme Workstreams

Following the publication of the latest guidance from DfE the workstreams within the programme have been reviewed and updated as follows:



The Board includes representatives from: Children's Social Care, SEND, Early Years education, Public Health, Primary School, Early Years settings, Oxford Health, ICB, VCFSE.

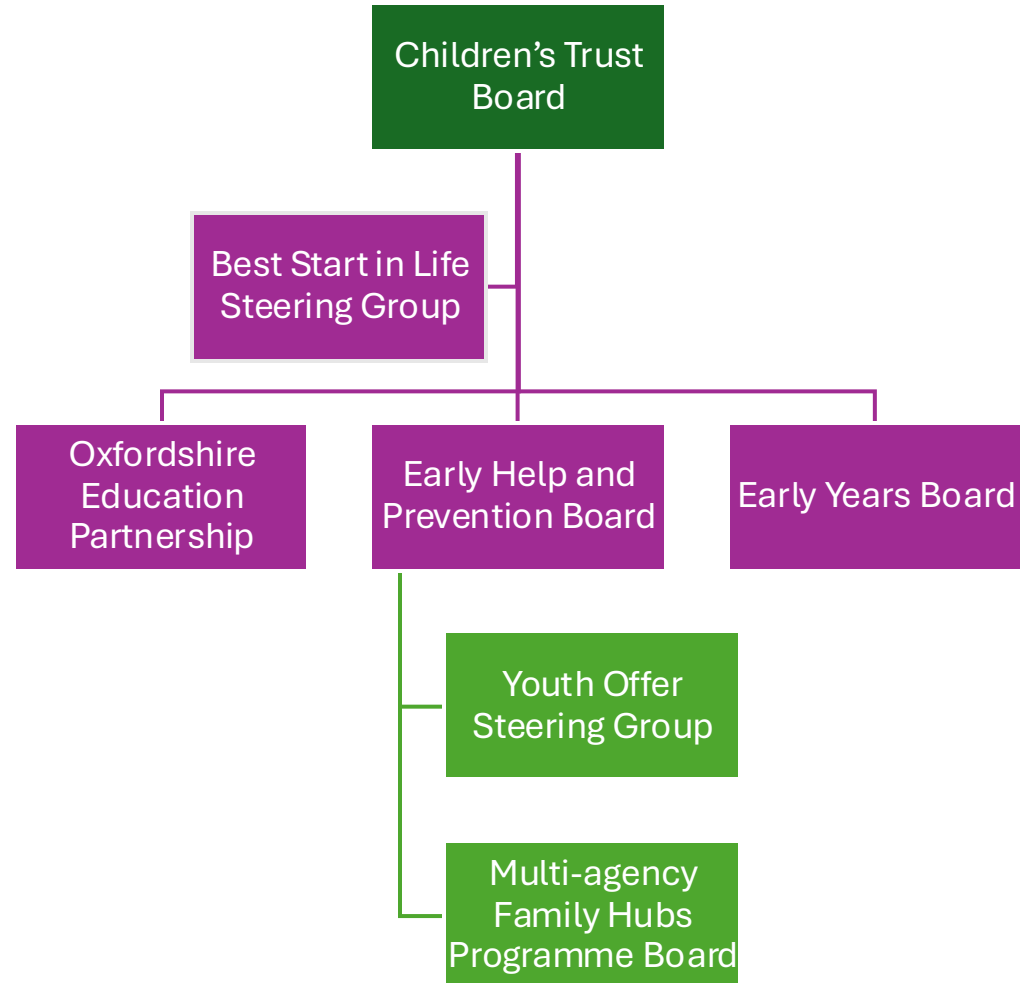


**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

Governance

- The Multi-agency Family Hubs Programme Board reports into the Early Help and Prevention Board.
- The Best Start in Life Steering Group brings together the co-chairs from the Early Years and Early Help and Prevention Boards to ensure alignment and support the deliver of the Best Start Family Hubs.

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**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

What does success look like?

- The key measures of success for Best Start Family Hubs are:
 - Increase in the percentage of children with a good level of development at 5 years old
 - Reduction in the percentage point difference between the proportion of children eligible or not eligible for Free School Meals achieving a Good Level of Development
 - Increase in the take up of 2-2.5 year health and development review
 - Percentage achieving good level of development at 2-2.5year review – outcome metric
 - Increase in the take-up rate of 2-year-old disadvantage childcare offer and of the 3–4-year-old 15 hours childcare offer

Appendix

- VCFSE Funding proposals
- Programme workstreams in further detail
- Full building proposals (short / medium and long term plans)

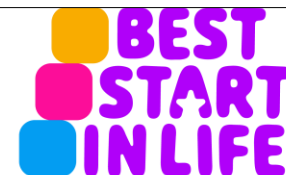
Appendix 1 - VCFSE Funding priorities

Proposed area	Rationale
Best Start Family Hub – Play and learn expansion	<p>We know that across Oxfordshire there are a range of VCFSE organisations delivering Play and Learn sessions. As part of Best Start Family Hubs we are committed to looking at how we can strengthen evidence-based sessions and expand this offer across the County.</p> <p>For example, this funding could be used to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train VCFSE and partners in developing and delivering evidence-based sessions • Development of a new regular play and learn session in a rural area • A SEND only Play and Learn session
Outreach	<p>A key part of our Best Start Family Hub Offer will include the development of an inclusive and non-stigmatising outreach service, that embeds the early help approach and supports the building of trust and enables families over time to access wider services in the community.</p> <p>For example, this funding could be used to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund an outreach service in an affluent area to engage those families that may not feel comfortable to attend a local play and learn sessions • Outreach with Traveller Families • Families within the Armed Forces • Families where there are emerging additional needs
Innovation / seed funding	<p>As well as the above, we also want to enable creative place-base innovations that address local needs.</p> <p>For example, this funding could be used to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund a mobile toy library to reach rural communities • Trial an online programme or session to engage families that cannot attend in person.

Appendix 1 - VCFSE Funding priorities

As well as the funding for direct delivery, it is proposed that the budget is made available to help develop the strategic leadership within the VCFSE.

Proposed area	Rationale
Strategic infrastructure support Page 97	<p>Oxfordshire has a thriving VCFSE sector, with a diverse range of organisations providing services and support across different ages. With the development of our Best Start in Life Plan and our focus on developing partnerships with the VCFSE, we need to develop the strategic infrastructure support to our VCFSE working within Early Years and Primary School ages. This offer would complement our existing infrastructure provided by Oxfordshire Youth Offer and the offer from OCVA to the VCFSE.</p> <p>This Strategic Infrastructure Support will be able to support with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping and engaging the VCFSE • Ensuring that the VCFSE in this area are kept up to date and engaged in national and local policy development • Support in workforce development • Ensuring there is a clear feedback loop between the VCFSE and Oxfordshire County Council.
Strategic locality leadership	<p>As part of the Best Start Family Hubs model, five localities will be established. Within each locality, it is proposed that a lead VCFSE partner is identified and funding provided to increase the capacity to engage consistently in locality-based governance and partnership meetings. This role would include clear responsibilities for fostering strong relationships with the wider VCFSE sector within the locality, acting as a conduit between organisations and the Family Hubs Partnership, and supporting the identification of shared themes, emerging needs and gaps in provision at a local level.</p>



**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

Appendix 2 - BSFHs workstreams

Workstreams	Aim	Intended outcomes / outputs
Best Start Family Hubs Leadership and Partnership	To ensure that there is a clear system wide leadership and partnership to delivering of Best Start Family Hubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A fit for purpose Multi-Agency Programme Board • 5 Partnerships across the County building a detailed understanding of need, aligned to the Youth Partnerships
Resourcing for Primary Best Start Family Hubs	To ensure that the 5 Best Start Family Hubs are delivering in line with local priorities and DfE requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hubs are effectively staffed • BSFHs are located in the areas with highest need • BSFHs are delivering from fit for purpose buildings
Core Best Start Family Hub Offer	To ensure that the council is delivering in line with the government requirements, and also reflecting local need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear parenting & HLE Programme offer across the county • High-quality play and learn sessions across the county • Clear healthy baby offer across the county. • Best Start Inclusion Practitioners in each primary hub

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**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

Appendix 2 - BSFHs workstreams

Workstreams	Aim	Intended outcomes / outputs
Wider Best Start Family Hub Offer	To ensure that the BSFH are delivering the wider offer, and where possible the go further	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grant funding is available to partners to deliver the cost-of-living services across the county There is a clear joined up offer across BSFH and Youth Partnerships to create a connected service for 0-19 (25 with SEND)
Outreach, communications, and engagement	To ensure that families and partners are shaping the BSFH offer and can access the services that need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communications plan (linked to BSIL) Engagement Plan
Workforce development	There is a clear workforce development plan, that covers both internal and external partners to ensure that staff are delivering in line with BSIL requirements and BSFH requirements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workforce development strategy Range of training provided
Data and digital	To develop our digital offer for families and partners and ensuring that the programme and all future progress is tracked and monitored to ensure we are in line with DfE requirements and local priorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved understanding of local services and information Families can access and engage in services in a range of different ways Clear tracking and monitoring of progress.

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EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

– 26 June 2026

Local Area Partnership SEND Improvement Notice lifted

Report by Director of Children's Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to**
 - a) Note the progress made by the local area partnership to secure the lifting of the Department for Education SEND Improvement Notice. Thank all partners, particularly Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum and the SEND Youth Forum for their contributions, insight and hard work.
 - b) Note that SEND improvement work will continue, including through our revised SEND Priority Action Plan and in response to national SEND reform.

Executive Summary

2. This report provides an update on the local area partnership SEND improvement notice issued to Oxfordshire in 2023. Following the monitoring visit in October 2025 and other oversight and assurance activities, the Secretary of State for Education has made the decision to lift the improvement notice.

Progress

3. We have been working closely with partners to strengthen special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) services in Oxfordshire since the SEND inspection of 2023 which highlighted 'systemic failures' in the local area partnership.
4. Following the SEND inspection, the Secretary of State for Education issued an improvement notice to Oxfordshire County Council and the Thames Valley Integrated Care Board (formerly Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board). This required the creation of our SEND Improvement and Assurance Board as well as regular priority action deep dives and stocktake reviews to oversee and monitor progress against the identified areas for improvement. This has been supplemented by our Ofsted annual conversations.

5. Following the inspection in 2023, a Priority Action Plan was developed to address the areas of significant weaknesses. The plan formed part of a wider SEND improvement programme which was designed to bring together the key stakeholders in the partnership to ensure a step change in our approach to SEND.
6. A key part of this approach has been strengthening how the voices of children, young people and parent carers inform improvement work and strategic planning. Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum (OxPCF) is an integral part of the local area partnership and is represented on all working groups, themes and boards, including the SEND Improvement & Assurance Board. The SEND Youth Forum likewise is a core part of our improvement journey and we work closely to design services and hear young people's feedback, as well as to further expand the reach of our engagement and participation.
7. In September-October 2025, we had a local area SEND monitoring inspection. The inspectors found that the local area has taken "effective action" to address all five areas for priority action identified at the initial inspection ([link to full report](#)). Ofsted and CQC recognised strengthened governance, improved communication and enhanced opportunities for children, young people and their families to contribute to service planning and evaluation.
8. In April 2026, we received a letter from the Secretary of State for Education confirming that our improvement notice has been lifted. The letter acknowledges the progress we have made, including to strengthen how the views of children and young people with SEND and parents and carers are used in strategic planning, to improve the timeliness of education, health and care (EHC) plans, and to reduce waiting times for critical support.
9. We know there is still more we can and must do to further improve SEND services in Oxfordshire for every child and family. As such, we have prepared an updated Priority Action Plan to respond to latest feedback and to take us forward on the next stage of our improvement journey. This was presented to Scrutiny in January 2026. Work is also ongoing to co-design our new SEND strategy, working closely with children, young people and their families to agree our priorities and vision.
10. These further improvements will dovetail with the work beginning in Oxfordshire to respond to SEND reform. In February 2026, the Government announced significant plans for national SEND reform, requiring all local areas to prepare a local SEND reform plan. This builds on the SEND improvement journey to date and our local partnership to support more children to access the right support, as close to home as possible where appropriate, and to improve their experiences and outcomes.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

11. Progress on our SEND improvement journey is a core part of how we deliver our fairer and healthier Oxfordshire vision. The ongoing improvement work led

by the SEND local area partnership falls under the broader strategy set by the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Children's Trust Board.

Financial Implications

12. There are no immediate financial implications arising directly from this report, which is for noting and does not seek approval for additional expenditure or changes to existing budgets. Ongoing SEND improvement activity, including the revised SEND Priority Action Plan, will need to be managed within approved budgets and existing governance arrangements. Any future financial implications arising from the national SEND reform programme and local SEND reform plan will be considered through the Council's normal budget monitoring, business planning and decision-making processes, with Cabinet decisions and supporting business cases brought forward as required.

Comments checked by:

Jane Billington, Strategic Finance Business Partner,
jane.billington@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Legal Implications

13. The report provides an update on the progress made by the local area partnership to secure the lifting of the Department for Education SEND Improvement Notice and reports that the SEND improvement work will continue.
14. Whilst there are no specific legal implications arising from the report, the letter from the Secretary of State for Education, dated 15 April 2026, makes it clear that further work and continuing progress is expected and sets out the potential consequences of a failure to meet those requirements.

Comments checked by:

Janice White – Principal Solicitor, ASC, Education and SEND

Staff Implications

15. There are no direct staffing implications arising from this report.

Comments checked by: Michelle Higgs, Strategic People Partner,
michelle.higgs@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Date:9/6/2026

Equality & Inclusion Implications

16. The improvement work progressed by the local area partnership is intended to improve experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND, and early evidence demonstrates positive progress in a number of areas.

Sustainability Implications

17. There are no sustainability implications.

Risk Management

18. A robust approach to risk management is in place across the SEND improvement programme. Monthly theme group meetings review risks and mitigations for each area, escalating as needed to the SEND Improvement and Assurance Board. The overall programme risk is recorded and reviewed monthly on the Council's risk register.

Lisa Lyons
Director of Children's Services

Annex: Annex 1: Letter from the Secretary of State for Education

Background papers: Local Area Partnership SEND update January 2026 (link: <https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s80393/EYP%20LAP%20Monitoring%20report.pdf>)

Contact Officer: Annette Perrington, Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion

June 2026



The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP
Secretary of State for Education

Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council
Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services
Dr Nick Broughton, Executive Lead, ICB

15 April 2026

Dear Cllr Leffman, Ms Lyons and Dr Broughton,

Local Area Partnership SEND Improvement Notice: Ofsted and Care Quality Commission Area SEND Monitoring Inspection findings and ongoing progress

Following the Area SEND inspection undertaken by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission in July 2023, an Improvement Notice was issued to Oxfordshire County Council with the expectation that urgent action be taken to improve services for children and young people with SEND.

Following the Improvement Notice being issued, I am pleased to hear of the progress that has been made. I have been reassured to read the findings from the Area SEND monitoring inspection which concluded on 1 October 2025, alongside insights and data from my Departmental officials in your region.

Since entering intervention, I understand that key improvements have been made leading towards positive change for children and young people, and that you have:

- Strengthened how the views of children and young people with SEND, and parents and carers, are gathered and used in strategic planning.
- Improved communication and information sharing across the partnership, including monitoring the impact of the partnership's actions.
- Enhanced the timeliness of EHC plans.
- Made significant progress in jointly commissioning services and reducing waiting times for critical support.

I have therefore taken the decision to lift the Improvement Notice on the understanding that the provision of SEND services will remain a priority for the council, and for all others in the local area partnership. I understand that this improvement work has taken significant commitment, determination and hard work, and I am grateful to all the staff who have made this possible.

To continue to support this journey to a reformed and improved SEND system both in Oxfordshire and nationally, in March 2026, we commissioned each local area partnership to develop and submit a Local SEND Reform Plan by June 2026, underpinned by a Local Partnership Maturity Assessment. We expect these

documents to be used to clearly set out how you will further improve and strengthen your system.

During the period in which Local SEND Reform Plans are being delivered, we expect your Local Area Partnership to show continuing progress on your Priority Action Plan.

If your Local SEND Reform Plan does not meet all the minimum requirements stated in the guidance, the Department will work with you to re-submit a plan that does meet these requirements, and may consider use of further intervention measures at that stage if we do not see sufficient progress and engagement.

During this period, you will continue to receive support from your DfE-provided SEND Adviser and Finance Adviser. The Council and its partners should continue to work with these advisers in producing and submitting a Local SEND Reform Plan. The Department, alongside regional NHS England colleagues, will also continue with their formal monitoring and engagement approach with the local area.

Thank you for the continued commitment and hard work of your council, ICB and local area partners. I look forward to seeing the continued improvement of services for children and young people with SEND in Oxfordshire.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bridget Phillipson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP
Secretary of State for Education

**Proposed Work Programme 2026/27
Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Cllr Liz Brighouse, OBE, Chair | Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer, richard.doney@oxfordshire.gov.uk

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Topic	Relevant strategic priorities	Purpose	Type	Report Leads
		26 June 2026		
Appointment of young co-opted members	Create Opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential; prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents; support carers and the social care system; tackle inequalities	To consider the recommendations of the recruitment panel who interviewed candidates.	Approval	Richard Doney
Joint Targeted Area Inspection Report	Create Opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential; prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents; support carers and the social care system; tackle inequalities	to consider the inspection report; to understand the roles and responsibilities of the different agencies; to be updated on the actions arising from the report	Overview and Scrutiny	Lisa Lyons, Annette Perrington; Deborah Smit.

Best Start in Life	Create Opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential; prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents; support carers and the social care system; tackle inequalities	to scrutinise the Council's plans for Best Start in Life, including family hubs and Early Help.	Overview and Scrutiny	Lisa Lyons, Annette Perrington; Deborah Smit.
SEND Improvement Notification Letter	Create Opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential; prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents; support carers and the social care system; tackle inequalities	To consider the SEND Improvement Notice; to consider the plans and priorities arising from this.	Overview and Scrutiny	Lisa Lyons
22 September 2026				
Harm Outside the Home and Child Sex Exploitation	Create Opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential; prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents; support carers and the social care system; tackle inequalities	<i>Scope to be confirmed</i>	Overview and Scrutiny	Lisa Lyons, tbc

Apprenticeships	Create Opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential; prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents; support carers and the social care system; tackle inequalities	<i>Scope to be confirmed</i>	Overview and Scrutiny	Lisa Lyons
Youth Justice Annual Plan	Create Opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential; prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents; support carers and the social care system; tackle inequalities	To consider the annual plan before it is adopted by the Youth Justice Board and adopted by Council; to be updated on the roles and responsibilities of the different agencies involved; to scrutinise the plans and priorities in this sphere.	Overview and Scrutiny	Lisa Lyons; Jessie Dobson
24 November 2026				
Virtual School annual report	Create Opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential; prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents; support carers and the social care system; tackle inequalities	To receive the annual report	Overview and Scrutiny	Lisa Lyons, Clare Pike

Adopt Thames Valley annual report	Create Opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential; prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents; support carers and the social care system; tackle inequalities	To receive the annual report	Overview and Scrutiny	Lisa Lyons, Charlotte Davy
Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership annual report	Create Opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential; prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents; support carers and the social care system; tackle inequalities	To receive the annual report	Overview and Scrutiny	Lisa Lyons
		19 January 2027		
		<i>To be decided</i>		
		27 April 2027		
		<i>To be decided</i>		

SUB GROUP / WORKING GROUP

SUB GROUPS / WORKING GROUPS				
Name	Relevant strategic priorities	Description	Outcomes	Members
Lessons Learned from Woodeaton	Create Opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential	Communications surrounding the Ofsted inspection	Report to Committee	Cllr Fletcher (Chair); Cllr Markham (Deputy Chair); Cllr Dr Creed; Cllr Graham; Cllr Plumb.

BRIEFINGS FOR MEMBER INFORMATION

BRIEFINGS				
Name	Relevant strategic priorities	Description	Outcomes	Members

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**Recommendation Tracker
Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

Cllr Liz Brighthouse OBE, Chair | Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer, richard.doney@oxfordshire.gov.uk

The recommendation update tracker enables the Committee to monitor progress accepted recommendations. The tracker is updated with recommendations accepted by Cabinet. Once a recommendation has been updated, it will be shaded green and reported into the next meeting of the Committee, after which it will be removed from the tracker. If the recommendation will be update in the form of a separate item, it will be shaded yellow.

KEY	Due to Cabinet	With Cabinet	Complete
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Recommendations:

Meeting date	Item	Recommendation	Lead	Update/response
27-Feb-26	Local Area Partnership Monitoring	1. That the Council should set out a clear plan for the long-term sustainability and resourcing of targeted SEND support across Oxfordshire, ensuring that improvements made through the Local Area SEND Partnership can be maintained despite ongoing financial and demand pressures.	Lisa Lyons	Accepted – see item 11
		2. That the Council should provide an updated strategic statement on the purpose, role, and operational expectations of resource bases within Oxfordshire schools, including how these bases will be funded and supported in		

KEY	Due to Cabinet	With Cabinet	Complete
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Meeting date	Item	Recommendation	Lead	Update/response
		the medium- to long-term as part of the wider SEND Improvement Programme.		
30-Jan-26	EOTAS	1. That the Council should arrange for the EOTAS guidance to be broken down, with simpler, plain English and accessible information provided for parents and carers, supported by appendices containing officer processes and technical detail.	Lisa Lyons; Annette Perrington	Accepted – see item 11
Page 114 21-Nov-25	Virtual School Report	1. That the Council should continue to work on improving attendance of those who are part of the Virtual School.	Lisa Lyons; Delia Mann; Charlotte Davey	Accepted – see item 11
		2. That the Council should continue to highlight the work of the Virtual school with governing boards and social workers to ensure they are well informed and engaged in supporting the education of children in care.		
21-Nov-25	Fostering	1. That the Council should commit to ‘Fostering Friendly Oxfordshire’ and continue to work with district councils and other key stakeholders to achieve this.	Lisa Lyons; Annette Perrington; Clare Pike	Accepted – see item 11
		2. That the Council should explore in more detail the possibility of a council tax-related offer for foster carers.		
21-Nov-25	Attainment	1. That the Council should adapt its protocol so that local members are notified when Cabinet members and senior officers visit schools within their division.	Lisa Lyons; Annette Perrington; Kim Wilson	Partially accepted – see item 11

KEY	Due to Cabinet	With Cabinet	Complete
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Meeting date	Item	Recommendation	Lead	Update/response
		2. That the Council should celebrate successes and share best practice across the family of schools in the area.		Partially accepted – see item 11
		3. That the Council, in developing the Oxfordshire Education and Inclusion Strategy, should ensure that sufficient attention is given to child safeguarding and protection as well as the curriculum review.		Accepted – see item 11

Action Tracker
Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Cllr Liz Brighthouse, Chair | Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer, richard.doney@oxfordshire.gov.uk

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KEY	Delayed	In progress	Complete
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Actions:

Meeting date	Item	Action	Lead	Update/response
There are no outstanding action items				

Recommendation Update Tracker

Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Cllr Liz Brighthouse OBE, Chair | Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer, richard.doney@oxfordshire.gov.uk

The recommendation update tracker enables the Committee to monitor progress accepted recommendations. The tracker is updated with recommendations accepted by Cabinet. Once a recommendation has been updated, it will be shaded green and reported into the next meeting of the Committee, after which it will be removed from the tracker. If the recommendation will be update in the form of a separate item, it will be shaded yellow.

KEY	Update Pending	Update in Item	Updated
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Cabinet Response Date	Item	Recommendation	Lead	Update
17 16-Sep-25	Update of Children's Homes	That the Council should encourage Ofsted to ensure the registration period for children's homes is as short as possible and thereby expedite the process of placing children in registered settings.	Lisa Lyons; Jean Kelly; Charlotte Davey	Progress update to be provided
16-Sep-25	s.19 of Education Act	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. That, notwithstanding the complexity of the processes being set out, the Council should ensure that the process chart at Annexe B is re-designed to make it clearer and easier to follow. 2. That the Council should highlight how there will be sufficient resource – both financial and practical – to ensure the s.19 approach and Pathway of Action can function adequately. 	Lisa Lyons	Progress update to be provided

KEY	Update Pending	Update in Item	Updated
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Cabinet Response Date	Item	Recommendation	Lead	Update
16-Sep-25	Home to School Transport	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. That the Council should work at pace to organise personal transport budgets with appropriate flexibility to take account of individual circumstances. 2. That the Council should ensure regular review of the policy is to mean 'annual', subject to legislative changes. 	Lisa Lyons; Paul Fermer; Vic Kurzeja	Progress update to be provided
18-Nov-25	School Catering Services and Corporate Cleaning Services	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. That the Council should outline the specific measures it has taken to ensure that rural schools are protected and that all schools will receive high quality catering services. 2. That the Council should set out the specific steps it will take to ensure that the rights and interests of existing staff members will be protected, and that trade unions will be consulted and engaged throughout the process. 	Lorna Baxter; Vic Kurzeja	Progress update to be provided
19-Nov-25	Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership Annual Report	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. That the Council should deploy a sustained, smart educational campaign to support parents and carers, particularly regarding online threats and should consider how best to do this. 	Lisa Lyons	Progress update to be provided as part of 2025/26 annual report

Overview & Scrutiny Recommendation Response Pro forma

Under section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, Overview and Scrutiny Committees must require the Cabinet or local authority to respond to a report or recommendations made thereto by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Such a response must be provided within two months from the date on which it is requested¹ and, if the report or recommendations in questions were published, the response also must be so.

This template provides a structure which respondents are encouraged to use. However, respondents are welcome to depart from the suggested structure provided the same information is included in a response. The usual way to publish a response is to include it in the agenda of a meeting of the body to which the report or recommendations were addressed.

Issue: **Local Area Partnership Monitoring and Priority Action Plan**

Lead Cabinet Member(s): **Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People**

Date response requested:² **17 March 2026**

Response to recommendations:

Recommendation	Accepted, rejected or partially accepted	Proposed action (if different to that recommended) and indicative timescale (unless rejected)
1. That the Council should set out a clear plan for the long-term sustainability and resourcing of targeted SEND support across Oxfordshire, ensuring that improvements made through the Local Area SEND Partnership can be maintained despite	Accepted	Subsequent to this meeting the Council are required by the DfE to set out a SEND Reform plan which will include a review of targeted SEND support across Oxfordshire, with financial commitments over the next 3 years. 30 th June 2026

¹ Date of the meeting at which report/recommendations were received

² Date of the meeting at which report/recommendations were received

Overview & Scrutiny Recommendation Response Pro forma

ongoing financial and demand pressures.		
2. That the Council should provide an updated strategic statement on the purpose, role, and operational expectations of resource bases within Oxfordshire schools, including how these bases will be funded and supported in the medium- to long-term as part of the wider SEND Improvement Programme.	Accepted	<p>The Council are undertaking a sufficiency review currently with a focus on resource bases and committed funding and will publish a Position statement by 30th May 2026.</p> <p>A longer term sufficiency strategy will follow by December 2026.</p>

Overview & Scrutiny Recommendation Response Pro forma

Under section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, Overview and Scrutiny Committees must require the Cabinet or local authority to respond to a report or recommendations made thereto by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Such a response must be provided within two months from the date on which it is requested¹ and, if the report or recommendations in questions were published, the response also must be so.

This template provides a structure which respondents are encouraged to use. However, respondents are welcome to depart from the suggested structure provided the same information is included in a response. The usual way to publish a response is to include it in the agenda of a meeting of the body to which the report or recommendations were addressed.

Issue: **2025 Provisional Attainment Outcomes**

Lead Cabinet Member(s): **Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People**

Date response requested:² **27 January 2026**

Response to recommendations:

Recommendation	Accepted, rejected or partially accepted	Proposed action (if different to that recommended) and indicative timescale (unless rejected)
1. That the Council should adapt its protocol so that local members are notified when Cabinet members and senior officers visit schools within their division.	Partially Accepted	Senior officers attend schools routinely, both planned and as required, and it would not be practical to advise local members for every school visit.
2. That the Council should celebrate successes and share best practice across the family of schools in the area.	Partially accepted	The Council routinely celebrate successes and share best practice across numerous networks and through newsletters to

¹ Date of the meeting at which report/recommendations were received

² Date of the meeting at which report/recommendations were received

Overview & Scrutiny Recommendation Response Pro forma

		schools. There is no date for implementation as this is already in place.
3. That the Council, in developing the Oxfordshire Education and Inclusion Strategy, should ensure that sufficient attention is given to child safeguarding and protection as well as the curriculum review.	Accepted	The Oxfordshire Education Partnership has amended its membership and established an Executive group to ensure inclusion of the education lead on the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Partnership Executive group, safeguarding remains a priority for all education settings and schools. This has been actioned.

Overview & Scrutiny Recommendation Response Pro forma

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Issue: **Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) Guidance**

Lead Cabinet Member(s): **Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People**

Date response requested:² **17 March 2026**

Response to recommendations:

Recommendation	Accepted, rejected or partially accepted	Proposed action (if different to that recommended) and indicative timescale (unless rejected)
That the Council should arrange for the EOTAS guidance to be broken down, with simpler, plain English and accessible information provided for parents and carers, supported by appendices containing officer processes and technical detail.	Accepted	The Deputy Director will arrange a joint face to face meeting with the PCF to review and amend the EOTAS guidance for parents and technical appendices. 30 th May 2026

¹ Date of the meeting at which report/recommendations were received

² Date of the meeting at which report/recommendations were received

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Overview & Scrutiny Recommendation Response Pro forma

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Issue: **Fostering**

Lead Cabinet Member(s): **Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People**

Date response requested:² **27 January 2026**

Response to recommendations:

Recommendation	Accepted, rejected or partially accepted	Proposed action (if different to that recommended) and indicative timescale (unless rejected)
1. That the Council should commit to 'Fostering Friendly Oxfordshire' and continue to work with district councils and other key stakeholders to achieve this.	Accepted	The council is now a Fostering Friendly Local Authority. The recruitment and marketing team is working with districts, business sector, school/college setting as well as 3 rd sector to promote Fostering friendly ethos.
2. That the Council should explore in more detail the possibility of a council tax-related offer for foster carers.	Accepted	The Fostering Marketing team is undertaking a business case on options for a potential reduction for foster carers, so they pay an adjusted Council Tax. As a part of this we are benchmarking approach in other Local Authorities.

¹ Date of the meeting at which report/recommendations were received

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Overview & Scrutiny Recommendation Response Pro forma

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Issue: **The Virtual School**

Lead Cabinet Member(s): **Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People**

Date response requested:² **27 January 2026**

Response to recommendations:

Recommendation	Accepted, rejected or partially accepted	Proposed action (if different to that recommended) and indicative timescale (unless rejected)
1. That the Council should continue to work on improving attendance of those who are part of the Virtual School.	Accepted	The Council will continue targeted attendance interventions and resource the Virtual School accordingly. The Virtual School will continue to deliver attendance support, which includes daily monitoring, swift follow-up on alerts, targeted interventions for pupils and schools, multi-agency oversight, strengthened partnership work with children's homes and ongoing training to

¹ Date of the meeting at which report/recommendations were received

² Date of the meeting at which report/recommendations were received

Overview & Scrutiny Recommendation Response Pro forma

		<p>address barriers to engagement. Progress on these activities will continue to be reported through the Virtual School's quarterly updates to the Corporate Parenting Board, with the full Annual Report presented each October. Scrutiny will have the opportunity to revisit and review progress and impact, should the Virtual School Head be invited to return for further consideration.</p>
<p>2. That the Council should continue to highlight the work of the Virtual school with governing boards and social workers to ensure they are well informed and engaged in supporting the education of children in care.</p>	<p>Accepted</p>	<p>The Council will strengthen communication with governing boards and social workers. The Virtual School will action this through established internal channels, including newsletters, targeted communications, training opportunities and the annual Virtual School conference. The Virtual School is also delivering dedicated training for school governors on Wednesday 4th March, which will become a standing element of its annual outreach and engagement work. Progress on these activities will continue to be reported through the Virtual School's quarterly updates to the Corporate Parenting Board, with the full Annual Report presented each October. Scrutiny will have the opportunity to revisit and review progress and impact, should the Virtual School Head be invited to return for further consideration.</p>