



EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Friday, 30 January 2026 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 12.23 pm.

Present:

Voting Members:

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

Co-Optee Members:

Fraser Long
Peace Nnaji

Other Members:

Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People

Officers:

Lisa Lyons, the Director of Children's Services
Annette Perrington, Interim Deputy Director: Education and Inclusion
Deborah Smit, Assistant Director: SEND and Inclusion
Matthew Tait, the Integrated Care Board's Chief Operating Officer
Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer

Others:

Jules Francis-Sinclair, Chair of Oxfordshire Parent Carer Forum
Sophia Johnson, Feedback and Reporting Co-Ordinator at Oxfordshire Parent Carer Forum
Steve Crocker, Independent Chair of the Oxfordshire SEND Strategic Improvement and Assurance Board

The Committee 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.

1/26 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Lisa Lyons, the Director of Children's Services, sent apologies that she would be late.

2/26 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

(Agenda No. 2)

There were none.

3/26 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

The Committee **APPROVED** the minutes of the previous meeting held on 21 November 2025 as a true and accurate record.

4/26 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

(Agenda No. 4)

Dr Claire El Mouden addressed the Committee, stated that the Council had not followed instructions to co-produce EOTAS guidance with parents. She said that, since June of the previous year, there had been no meetings between officers and parents about the guidance, and only one meeting about the toolkit. Dr El Mouden's EOTAS Working Group had conducted their own consultation, finding the guidance unclear, overly complex, and inaccessible. She called for practical tools, clearer responsibilities, and questioned the implementation of scrutiny recommendations.

The Chair reminded the Committee that it could not instruct. The Committee had made recommendations.

5/26 LOCAL AREA PARTNERSHIP MONITORING AND PRIORITY ACTION PLAN

(Agenda No. 5)

The Committee invited Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, Lisa Lyons, the Director of Children's Services, Matthew Tait, the Integrated Care Board's Chief Operating Officer, to attend to present the report as well as Annette Perrington, Interim Deputy Director for Education, Deborah Smit, Assistant Director: SEND and Inclusion, Steve Crocker, Independent Chair of the Oxfordshire SEND Strategic Improvement and Assurance Board, and Jules Francis-Sinclair, the Chair of the Oxfordshire Parent Carer Forum.

The Committee also welcomed Sophia Johnson, Feedback and Reporting Co-Ordinator at OxPCF, to the meeting to support the discussion.

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People commented on the progress within the SEND Local Area Partnership over recent years and expressed confidence that the Partnership had matured into a more coherent, outcome focused endeavour. This renewed assurance stemmed from stronger joint working arrangements and the steady stewardship of The Independent Chair. The Cabinet Member emphasised that

collective effort across agencies and dedicated work by officers had helped establish a clearer, shared purpose around improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

The Assistant Director: SEND and Inclusion provided a structured overview of the Local Area Partnership's progress since the SEND inspection of July 2023. Five priority action areas framed the work: elevating the voices of children and young people with SEND; strengthening communication across the system; improving the quality and timeliness of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs); reinforcing commissioning; and ensuring robust accountability and governance. She reported steady, evidenced progress across each area, supported by ongoing monitoring and scrutiny by national regulators. Whilst acknowledging improvements, she highlighted challenges that still required attention, including inconsistencies in communication, deepening workforce understanding of SEND, and widening participation in the youth forum so that more voices were captured.

The Independent Chair underscored the centrality of partnership working. He observed that the system had become more cohesive and practical in its focus, with headteachers, health partners and Council officers working more consistently toward shared objectives. He nonetheless cautioned that the Partnership operated within a national context marked by structural pressures, uneven performance and ongoing turbulence. Sustaining local progress would therefore require vigilance, continuous attention to delivery, and a readiness to adapt.

Building on those points, the Integrated Care Board's Chief Operating Officer set out the developments seen across joint working in the previous six to twelve months. He noted that partners had engaged in difficult conversations and stayed committed despite pressures. The shift in emphasis towards transformation, redesigned pathways, and earlier access to support had begun to make a difference in some areas, even where the overall system remained under strain. These changes reflected a growing confidence to test new models rather than rely solely on additional capacity.

The Feedback and Reporting Co-ordinator at the OxPCF explained that she and colleagues had contributed extensively to the coproduction of the Priority Action Plan. Many of the Forum's proposals had been retained in the final document; others had not been included because they lacked measurable indicators or alignment with regulatory requirements, and some had been redirected into the wider SEND improvement programme. This approach ensured that contributions without immediate metrics were not lost but were instead tracked through relevant workstreams.

Members raised local government reorganisation (LGR) and its potential implications. Members recognised that the scale of possible structural change called for early planning and careful stewardship through transition. The Independent Chair confirmed that the Partnership had deliberately considered these issues and was preparing for different scenarios. He noted that, should the improvement notice be lifted, his role would not technically be required; however, he had agreed to remain in post through any reorganisation to provide continuity as well as to reassure partners and to preserve momentum. This would help ensure a smooth handover into

whatever new arrangements might follow. The Partnership would continue to keep reform firmly in mind while acknowledging that the ultimate shape of future governance was not yet known.

Waiting times and what improvements in those could be evidenced was raised. The Independent Chair distinguished between waits linked to the EHCP process and those within broader health services. He confirmed that health advice for EHCPs was generally being provided within the statutory six-week timeframe, and that overall EHCP timeliness had risen above national averages. The Integrated Care Board's Chief Operating Officer added that progress across health services was mixed: occupational therapy waits had reduced from thirty-three to twenty-two weeks, while waits for speech and language therapy and physiotherapy had remained static or increased in places. He observed that meaningful gains often came from redesigned pathways, such as improved triage and targeted support, rather than from simple increases in staffing.

The discussion also explored early support at the point when concerns first emerged, particularly in early years settings. Officers explained that while formal assessments could involve delays, urgent cases were triaged to ensure that the highest need children were seen first. They highlighted the use of the WellComm screening tool in early years, which enabled practitioners to identify speech and language needs quickly and start targeted activities without delay. These interventions were recorded and monitored, and they informed joint commissioning reviews, creating a clearer picture of demand and helping the system to respond more intelligently. Officers further noted that training for school and early years staff had been expanded, so that practical help could be provided while families waited for specialist input.

Members examined the balance between the improved timeliness of EHCPs and the imperative to maintain quality. Officers recognised the risk of prioritising speed over substance and set out the safeguards that had been put in place. The Assistant Director: SEND and Inclusion reported that timeliness had improved markedly, with recent performance at 92% and the average issuing time now below twenty weeks. To protect quality and consistency, multi-agency assurance processes had been implemented, including quarterly reporting by service leads on both timeliness and the quality of professional advice. Regular audits were undertaken, and focused development targeted sections requiring improvement, such as capturing the child's view and strengthening professional contributions. The intention was to embed a high-quality standard across all plans, not merely to achieve faster throughput.

There was further consideration of how Oxfordshire's waiting times compared with neighbouring areas. Officers explained that, across the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West system, Oxfordshire's waiting times were broadly comparable, though the picture varied by service. Occupational therapy had seen tangible reductions, while speech and language and physiotherapy remained more static. Officers reiterated that training and early help approaches were being expanded so that support could begin ahead of formal assessment, thereby reducing the impact of waits on education and development.

Members then discussed how progress against the Priority Action Plan was being measured, given the value of clear indicators to flag issues early. Officers explained

that, whilst an earlier plan iteration had used a Red-Amber-Green framework linked to Department for Education stocktakes, the updated assurance model sat within the broader SEND transformation governance. Themed working groups now produced monthly highlight reports covering progress, next steps, and any risks or barriers. These reports were escalated to the Partnership Delivery Group and the SEND Improvement and Assurance Board, enabling structured challenge and early resolution. This approach aimed to identify risks promptly rather than allow pressures to accumulate unnoticed.

The incorporation of children and young people's voices formed a further strand of discussion, including whether older young people were asked to reflect on earlier stages of their journey. The Independent Chair confirmed that this retrospective perspective was already being captured. Older young people attending the Improvement Board had offered thoughtful reflections on what might have helped at critical points, such as the transition to secondary school, and how earlier support could have altered their experiences. He cautioned that, whilst these narratives were valuable, it was important not to overgeneralise from individual accounts, and to triangulate feedback with wider system evidence.

Communication structures were also reviewed, with Members probing whether improvements were embedded across the system, rather than concentrated in standalone initiatives. Officers described a set of measures introduced since 2023: online SEND Conversations that opened two-way dialogue with parents and explained transformation work; focused listening events on themes such as communication, travel and alternative provision; and the coproduction of a Communication Pledge that set out clear expectations for families. Together, these actions formed the backbone of a more transparent, regular and trust building approach to engagement.

Officers and representatives from OxPCF reflected further on the effect of these changes. The Assistant Director: SEND and Inclusion reported that the combination of listening events and SEND Conversations had created more constructive dialogue and practical feedback loops. The Feedback and Reporting Co-ordinator confirmed that OxPCF had strengthened its mechanisms for gathering and channelling parent experiences across multiple workstreams, though capacity and reach remained active challenges. The Chair of OxPCF agreed that partnership working had deepened and that parent voice was more consistently embedded in discussions, whilst acknowledging that aligning feedback with fast moving workstreams would continue to require attention.

Steve Crocker left the meeting at this stage.

Later discussion scrutinised the target for improving healthcare transitions by spring 2027, with questions raised about feasibility given the pressures in adult services. The Integrated Care Board's Chief Operating Officer acknowledged the scale of the challenge. He explained that improvements depended on both service transformation and securing sufficient investment to address the mismatch between demand and capacity. While some waiting times had reduced in specific services, the broader aim would require sustained resourcing. He stated that the Board intended to reduce community waiting times to eighteen weeks over the next two years, though financial

risks remained because the required level of investment had yet to be secured. Officers agreed that the assumptions underpinning the 2027 target should be revisited to test their realism.

The proposed ambition of a 25% reduction in Care and Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) complaints was also examined. Members questioned whether this represented a sufficiently stretching goal, given that a complaint at that level often indicated that earlier support had not been effective. Officers accepted the point and agreed that the target should be reviewed. They observed that many complaints reflected system wide capacity pressures rather than isolated failings but acknowledged the need for sharper focus on earlier interventions and stronger support to prevent escalation. A reconsidered target would balance realism with ambition and would be aligned to the transformation work already underway.

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People recognised the significant progress achieved while emphasising that there was no complacency about the work still to be done. The Cabinet Member praised the commitment of partners and officers, reiterated the intention to maintain momentum, and suggested that members might benefit from observing the SEND Improvement and Assurance Board's work first hand to see how the maturing partnership was driving improvement.

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

- **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.
- **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.
- **That the Council** develop and publish a strengthened transition pathway for children and young people moving from primary resource bases into secondary education, ensuring continuity of provision, clarity for families, and an enhanced assurance framework aligned to the improvement actions identified since the 2023 SEND inspection which should also include benchmarking against statistical neighbours and comparable authorities.

The Committee **AGREED** to the following Actions:

- The Interim Deputy Director to provide a graph setting out how timeliness had improved;
- Members of the Committee to be invited to observe work at the Enhanced Pathways.

6/26 EDUCATION OTHER THAN AT SCHOOL UPDATE

(Agenda No. 6)

Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, Lisa Lyons, the Director of Children's Services, Annette Perrington, Interim Deputy Director: Education and Inclusion, and Deborah Smit, Assistant Director: SEND and Inclusion, were invited to present the report. Jules Francis-Sinclair, Chair of OxPCF, and Sophia Johnson, Feedback and Reporting Co-Ordinator at OxPCF, were also invited to the meeting to support the Committee's discussions.

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People introduced the Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) item by recalling his early experience of the topic on joining the County Council and Cabinet, noting the volume of representations and the ongoing public interest. At that point, the Council had required a clear policy framework. Whilst the policy itself had included some co-production, the accompanying guidance had not. Cabinet therefore approved the policy but, in line with the Committee's recommendation required that the guidance be taken through a co production process.

The Chair of OxPCF acknowledged the substantial effort invested in developing the EOTAS guidance but considered it not yet ready to be treated as final or genuinely co-produced. Concerns centred on the process and the absence of a clear co production framework, limited senior officer involvement, and unresolved issues raised by parents. The guidance set out expectations of parents with reasonable clarity, but it was judged to lack corresponding clarity about the Council's responsibilities, arrangements for monitoring and safeguarding, and accessibility. The Chair of OxPCF recommended further senior led meetings, clearer language and structure, practical appendices, and a proper publication plan, together with a commitment to review the guidance after one year.

The Interim Deputy Director: Education and Inclusion recognised the considerable work and engagement undertaken and accepted that confidence in the document's usefulness to parents had not yet been fully established. The point of the current stage was to reflect carefully on the feedback and determine the further steps required to secure a helpful, agreed document.

The Chair clarified the role of scrutiny in relation to EOTAS and reminded members that the Committee's function was to make recommendations rather than to dictate to Cabinet. Both the policy and the draft guidance had previously gone to Cabinet; the task now was to focus on what the Committee wished to say about the guidance, rather than revisiting the detailed content line by line.

A Member suggested that, whilst the guidance might be clear for officers, it might still be insufficiently accessible for parents and proposed two versions, one setting out full information and one designed explicitly for families. The importance of language and accessibility was emphasised, together with the value of further parent input so that the resulting guidance became both meaningful and usable in practice.

Officers advised that, whilst accessibility was a core aim, excluding or oversimplifying legal material could mislead families or produce guidance unable to withstand

challenge. It was set out that the combination of legal complexity and the bespoke nature of each EOTAS package meant that co production had been sensitive and time consuming. Officers explained that EOTAS arrangements were intrinsically technical as they depended on strict statutory tests, especially the need to demonstrate that a child's needs could not be met in a school. Guidance therefore had to address detailed legal points, including the Section 61 test, commissioning responsibilities, safeguarding requirements, and expectations for monitoring provision.

The report described involvement from parents through OxPCF, parents of children with EOTAS, CAMHS representation, Oxford Health, and SENDIASS. Clarification was sought on whether these participants had in fact met collectively as a group during the guidance's development.

Officers explained that SENDIASS had been commissioned to coordinate the co production process because of its established links with families. Parent representatives, SENDIASS, health partners and others had been engaged throughout, and drafts had moved iteratively between contributors. It was acknowledged that the process had not followed a "pure" model of co-production, though contributions from parents had been extensive and coordinated.

The discussion explored why collaboration had been challenging and whether the legal framework had contributed to complexity. While accessibility was a core aim, Parents on the working group concurred that the legal technicalities complicated the process, with differing interpretations requiring repeated clarification.

Officers confirmed that, whilst the policy was required, the Council had considered it good practice to produce guidance for transparency and to help parents navigate the complexity of decisions and arrangements in practice. The guidance had therefore been commissioned to support understanding rather than to fulfil a legal duty.

Officers confirmed that other local authorities did publish EOTAS guidance, and examples had been reviewed. These could not simply be replicated, since each area's EOTAS landscape differed in local practice, parental expectations and the complexity of packages and guidance from elsewhere would not have been co-produced with Oxfordshire parents. It was also noted that some Councils operated blanket restrictions on EOTAS, whereas Oxfordshire had a comparatively higher number of complex packages, further limiting the usefulness of national templates. The guidance, therefore, needed to be shaped locally.

The breadth of parent carer involvement was discussed, including representation across different backgrounds, needs and experiences. Officers confirmed that the working group had included OxPCF, parents of children with EOTAS, SENDIASS, Oxford Health and CAMHS. SENDIASS had coordinated much of the engagement owing to strong links with families. Officers also acknowledged that they could not confirm representation across all protected characteristics or the full diversity of the parent population; achieving such representation remained challenging despite multiple routes of engagement.

Concerns about accessible language recurred, with suggestions that parents would benefit from a practical, plain English companion document containing checklists, templates, and examples. A short, two-to-five-page introduction with a glossary and contents page was suggested, supported by appendices for technical material. Officers regarded this as a reasonable approach.

Much of the existing length and complexity flowed from legal requirements and the bespoke nature of packages; however, a simplified version could outline key processes, responsibilities and safeguards in a more usable format. The Assistant Director: SEND and Inclusion agreed that placing more technical material in appendices and improving clarity would be beneficial, and the Chair of OxPCF supported developing a parent facing counterpart to the technical guidance.

The Director of Children's Services joined the meeting at this stage.

The Chair returned to the question of scrutiny's role and the appropriate recommendations to Cabinet. It was suggested that Cabinet be asked to consider providing a pro forma, without the need for co production, to assist OxPCF in producing accessible materials for families. The aim would be a simpler, user-friendly resource that accurately reflected the agreed policy while improving clarity and accessibility for parents engaging with EOTAS.

The Interim Deputy Director: Education and Inclusion concluded that, although the guidance had benefited from significant input by parents and the working group, the diversity of circumstances meant it would always be difficult to meet every need fully. Not all parents were dissatisfied, but the emotive nature of EOTAS and the complexity of packages in Oxfordshire were recognised. The commitment remained to make the guidance as clear as possible, acknowledging the challenge of consensus and the learning taken from the process.

The Assistant Director: SEND and Inclusion reflected that the draft attempted both to inform parents and to document internal Officer processes; the original intention had been to guide parents through understanding EOTAS rather than to set out internal procedures. Separating the two strands into appendices was considered useful, allowing for updates as frameworks evolved, including any changes arising from a future White Paper. The emphasis would be on trust, transparency, and manageable structure.

The Committee explored whether children who had never attended school owing to severe health needs would be disadvantaged when seeking EOTAS. Officers explained that decisions turned on the legal test, whether needs could not be met in a school, rather than on prior attendance. A school would normally be consulted to assess whether it could reasonably meet the child's needs, but this did not require prior physical attendance. Children with very complex medical needs were often supported by the Hospital and Home Education Service rather than through EOTAS packages. Decisions were bespoke, and a lack of attendance history did not disadvantage such children.

Costs and construction of EOTAS packages were then discussed. Officers explained that packages were highly bespoke and therefore varied considerably in cost. The

most expensive package had been around £300,000 per year, with most falling between £60,000 and £100,000 annually. These figures reflected the requirement to commission individual provision, including tutors, therapists, specialist staff and bespoke timetables assembled to meet each child's assessed needs. Across Oxfordshire, the total cost of EOTAS packages had previously been estimated at about £3.8 million for approximately seventy children. Each package was built from a detailed assessment of need, determining which elements could not be delivered in a school setting; this bespoke approach explained both the variation in cost and the complexity of managing EOTAS arrangements.

Funding for enhanced pathways was also considered, to understand how mainstream based inclusion programmes were resourced relative to EOTAS. Officers stated that each enhanced pathway was funded at the level of one teacher and one high level teaching assistant, amounting to roughly £85,000 per year. This supported a cohort of around ten children with higher levels of need who might otherwise be at risk of moving into specialist provision. To avoid double funding, the Council deducted the Element 3 top up already allocated to each child through their EHCP, with the pathway funding supplementing that amount. The model had stabilised placements and reduced the flow into specialist settings, and the Council was exploring expansion in response to positive impact.

In concluding remarks, the Committee recognised that the guidance had progressed but accepted the case for further refinement. Recommendations favoured a clearer separation between statutory/technical material and practical, parent facing information, improved accessibility and structure, and a plan for publication and ongoing review.

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

- That the EOTAS guidance be broken down, with simpler, plain English and accessible information for parents provided in separate appendices so as to make the main guidance more manageable and user-friendly, while allowing detailed officer processes and updates to be maintained in the appendices.

7/26 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN (Agenda No. 7)

The Committee **AGREED** to the forward work plan.

The Committee was advised that terms of reference for the Woodeaton working group were being developed and it was now intended that they be submitted to the Committee at its February meeting.

The Committee agreed to a future item on support for adoptive parents, particularly focusing on challenges faced when children have difficulty adjusting, to review what support is provided in Oxfordshire.

The Committee was advised the upcoming SEND White Paper will require local area partnerships to create a transformation response plan for the Department for

Education, likely by summer or autumn, which the Committee will review once available.

8/26 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER
(Agenda No. 8)

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

..... in the Chair

Date of signing