



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 Didiyally, 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 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, 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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