



EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Friday, 26 June 2026 commencing at 10.30 am and finishing at 1.07 pm.

Present:

Voting Members:

Councillor Liz Brighthouse OBE - in the Chair
(Deputy Chair)
Councillor Ron Batstone
Councillor Dr Izzy Creed
Councillor Georgina Heritage
Councillor Johnny Hope-Smith
Councillor Toyah Overton
Councillor James Plumb

Co-Optee Members:

Peace Nnaji

**Other Members in
Attendance:**

Cllr Stefan Gawrysiak
Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young
People

Officers:

Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services
Annette Pennington, Strategic Lead for Education, Policy,
and Implementation
Laurie Baker, Deputy Director for Education and Inclusion
Carol Douch, Deputy Director for Safeguarding
Sophie Black, Assistant Director for Early Help and
Prevention
Deb Smit, Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion
Laura Gadjus, Business Manager, OSCP
Harriet Preedy, Team Manager, Targeted Youth Support
Service
Jenny Stoker, Operational Lead, Family Hubs
Lou Everatt, Head of Oxfordshire, HMPPS
Debbie Hartick, Director of Safeguarding (Thames Valley
ICB)
Liane Lewis, Designated Nurse (Thames Valley ICB)
Annabel Kay, Chair of Safeguarding in Education Sub-
group
Charlotte Donohoe, Head of Specialist Safeguarding,
Thames Valley Police
Richard Doney, Scrutiny 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.

21/26 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Graham (substitute: Cllr Batstone) and from Fraser Long (co-opted member).

Cllr Gawrysiak attended as a guest of the Chair and Peace Nnaji attended remotely, at the Chair's discretion.

Leah Q and Elza B also attended informally, in advance of their appointment to the Committee.

22/26 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

(Agenda No. 2)

There were none.

23/26 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

The minutes of the meeting on 27 February 2026 and on 12 May 2026 were **AGREED** as a true and accurate record.

24/26 CO-OPTEE RECRUITMENT UPDATE

(Agenda No. 4)

The Committee considered the report and agreed to **NOTE** the update on activity undertaken to fill the Committee's vacant co-optee post for a parent governor and agreed 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.

25/26 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

(Agenda No. 5)

There was one public speaker, with the Chair inviting her to speak before the Best Start in Life Plan item.

Dr Karen Bateson, speaking on behalf of voluntary sector partners, welcomed the Council's commitment to collaboration through Best Start in Life and Family Hubs but expressed concerns that recent decisions and engagement with the voluntary sector had not reflected the principles of trust, transparency, co-production and shared responsibility set out in Council strategies.

The Chair invited the Cabinet member to respond to the points raised and he thanked the speaker for attending and welcomed further discussion outside the meeting. Cllr Gaul advised that collaboration between the voluntary sector and the developing

Family Hub model would be discussed in more detail under the next agenda item, noting that the Council had received clear expectations from Government that Family Hubs should work closely with voluntary and community organisations. He reported that the Oxfordshire Family Alliance had recently been contacted to explore opportunities for joint working and ongoing dialogue.

In relation to the Infant Parent Perinatal Service, the Cabinet Member clarified that the service was commissioned and funded by the NHS rather than Oxfordshire County Council. He explained that the Integrated Care Board (ICB) had proposed withdrawing three services: the Infant Parent Perinatal Service, the Child and Adolescent Harmful Behaviour Service, and the Family Assessment and Safeguarding Service. He further noted that five Oxfordshire MPs had written to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care requesting that the decision be reviewed and that the matter was currently under consideration by the successor Thames Valley ICB. He emphasised that the proposed service changes were not decisions of the County Council.

26/26 JTAI INSPECTION REPORT OF THE MULTI-AGENCY RESPONSE TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT IN OXFORDSHIRE
(Agenda No. 6)

The Committee had requested a report on the findings of the Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) of the multi-agency response to child sexual abuse in the family environment in Oxfordshire.

Councillor Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, attended to present the report. He was accompanied by Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services and Chair of the Safeguarding Children Partnership, Laurie Baker, Deputy Director for Education and Inclusion, Annette Perrington, Strategic Lead, Carol Douch, Deputy Director Safeguarding, Laura Gadjus, Business Manager, Lou Everatt, Head of Oxfordshire (Probation Service), Debbie Hartick, Director of Safeguarding (Thames Valley Integrated Care Board), Liane Lewis, Designated Nurse, Annabel Kay, Chair of Safeguarding in Education Sub-group, Charlotte Donohoe, Head of Specialist Safeguarding (Thames Valley Police).

In introducing the report, the Cabinet Member emphasised the gravity and sensitivity of the subject matter. He stated that the discussion was necessarily difficult, noting that such abuse often occurred in settings where children should be safest and was therefore particularly challenging to identify and address. He highlighted that the inspection did not provide a graded judgement but instead presented detailed thematic findings about system effectiveness. He welcomed the report and the opportunity it provided to reflect on safeguarding arrangements, placing on record his appreciation for the work of all those working in safeguarding across the county.

The Director of Children's Services explained that the inspection had focused specifically on child sexual abuse within the family environment, distinguishing this from exploitation outside the home. She noted that this form of abuse was significantly under-reported and often harder to detect due to the absence of disclosure and the private nature of family settings.

The Director emphasised that safeguarding was a shared responsibility across statutory partners, including the local authority, health services, the police, and education providers, with oversight provided through the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership. She advised that, whilst the published letter summarising the inspection's findings, was relatively concise, the detailed feedback provided by inspectors had been more positive, particularly in relation to the quality and timeliness of responses where abuse had already been identified.

The Director further noted that a multi-agency action plan was being developed in response to the inspection, with submission required later in the summer, but that work to address identified issues had already commenced.

In discussion, the Committee discussed the following:

How data was shared across organisations and how the Partnership intended to improve its understanding of risk.

Officers acknowledged that, whilst individual agencies held strong datasets, integration across the system had been limited. The Deputy Director Safeguarding confirmed that a dedicated analyst had been appointed by the Partnership to develop a shared dashboard to provide a more comprehensive picture of safeguarding risks. She noted that progress had already been made although full system alignment remained complex.

Immediate changes being implemented

The Probation Service's Head of Oxfordshire explained that capacity within their service had improved following staffing changes and that a dedicated partnership manager had been appointed to strengthen engagement with safeguarding arrangements. Officers across agencies confirmed that actions had already begun, including increased collaboration and improved attendance at multi-agency meetings.

Accountability within multi-agency arrangements.

The Director of Children's Services explained that safeguarding responsibilities were joint across statutory partners (namely, Health, Children's Services at the Council, Thames Valley Police, and schools) but that operational leadership typically rested jointly with police and children's social care. She confirmed that, as statutory Director, she retained ultimate accountability for safeguarding outcomes within the local authority. However, it would be for the Police and the Crown Prosecution Service to decide how to deal with a criminal investigation or trial.

Earlier identification of non-disclosed abuse

Officers acknowledged that this was inherently challenging, as it relied on recognising behavioural indicators and patterns rather than explicit evidence. They emphasised the importance of professional curiosity, awareness raising and training, and advised that tools and guidance had been reissued across the Partnership. Officers advised that increased awareness had already led to a modest rise in referrals.

Safeguarding training

Officers confirmed that training was being expanded across the education sector, including early years settings and governing bodies, and that additional resource had been allocated to the education safeguarding advisory team to support this work.

Performance measures

Members also questioned how improvement would be measured, noting the absence of clear performance indicators. Officers explained that national data on prevalence was limited and that increased reporting might indicate improved confidence rather than increased incidence. They advised that work was underway to develop more sophisticated measures, combining quantitative data with qualitative insights.

Concerns were raised regarding the high volume of referrals into the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). Officers reported that approximately 50,000 contacts were received annually and acknowledged that this created challenges in prioritising risk. They explained that work was underway to improve triage processes and to support partners in making more appropriate referrals.

Finally, Members asked about the management of risks posed by known offenders. Officers confirmed that this relied on effective information sharing and multi-agency risk management arrangements, including MAPPA processes. They acknowledged that this remained complex, particularly where information was incomplete or not shared promptly, and confirmed that improvements were being made in this area.

The Committee agreed to note the report and to request a progress update in early 2027.

27/26 BEST START IN LIFE PLAN (Agenda No. 7)

This item and the following one were merged during the course of the meeting.

The Committee considered the Best Start in Life Plan, presented by the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People. He was accompanied by Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Laurie Baker, Deputy Director for Education and Inclusion, Annette Pennington, Sophie Black, Assistant Director for Early Help and Prevention, Harriet Preddie, Targeted Youth Support Service Manager, and Jenny Stoker, Operational Lead for Family Hubs.

In introducing the item, the Cabinet Member framed the Plan as a central strategic priority, expressing strong support for its ambition to improve outcomes for children in their earliest years. He focused particularly on the importance of children achieving a Good Level of Development at age five, describing this as a critical point in determining future educational success. Whilst acknowledging that Oxfordshire performed relatively well overall, he highlighted a significant gap between children eligible for free school meals and their peers. He stated that he had not been

satisfied with the level of ambition in national targets and had therefore supported the adoption of more challenging local targets to reduce inequality more substantially.

The Director of Children's Services explained that the Plan brought together a range of existing strategies into a single, coordinated framework covering the period from pregnancy to school entry. She emphasised that early years outcomes were influenced by a wide range of factors, including health, parenting, early education and community support, and that effective delivery required a whole-system, partnership-based approach. She advised that governance arrangements were in place through the Children's Trust Board and supporting groups to ensure oversight of delivery, performance and resource allocation.

Officers further outlined the practical delivery model, including integration with Family Hubs, early identification of need, and investment in workforce development. They emphasised the importance of the first 1,001 days of a child's life and described how targeted support, including health visiting, inclusion practitioners and early intervention programmes, would be delivered through a coordinated system.

In discussion, Members asked how the Plan would translate into practical action. Officers provided examples including the introduction of auto-enrolment for free school meals, which would increase take-up and direct additional funding to schools, and the expansion of targeted early years support. Members queried whether sufficient focus was placed on the earliest years, including pre-school children. Officers confirmed that intervention began from pregnancy and infancy and included childcare sufficiency from nine months, targeted provision for two-year-olds, and support delivered through Family Hubs.

The Committee asked how progress would be monitored. Officers confirmed that targets and milestones were being developed and that progress would be tracked through governance structures, with flexibility to adapt approaches based on learning and data.

Members raised concerns regarding uptake of free school meals and childcare entitlements, including issues of stigma. Officers advised that auto-enrolment and sensitive engagement with families would address this, and that childcare sufficiency planning would ensure sufficient provision was available.

Members asked which interventions were likely to be most impactful. Officers emphasised the importance of speech, language and communication, along with parenting support, nutrition, and the home learning environment, noting that these factors were fundamental to school readiness.

The Committee **AGREED** to make the following recommendation to Cabinet which applied to both the Best Start in Life Plan and to the item on Best Start Family Hubs in Oxfordshire:

That the Council should ensure that sufficient resources are available to deliver the Best Start in Life Plan's ambition and to support achievement of Oxfordshire's ambitions for children, including the more stretching local targets for children eligible for free school meals.

28/26 BEST START FAMILY HUBS IN OXFORDSHIRE
(Agenda No. 8)

This item and the preceding one were merged during the course of the meeting.

The Committee also considered the report on the development of Best Start Family Hubs as a key delivery mechanism for the Best Start in Life Plan.

In introducing the item, the Cabinet Member described Family Hubs as a significant opportunity to transform how services for children and families were delivered, moving from a fragmented system to one that was more integrated, accessible and responsive. He emphasised that this approach required strong partnership working, particularly with the voluntary and community sector, and acknowledged that this represented a substantial shift in practice.

The Director of Children's Services outlined the proposed model, explaining that five locality-based hubs would be established, each supported by a network of partner organisations delivering services across the community. She emphasised that the intention was not to replace existing services but to bring them together in a more coherent system, ensuring families experienced support as joined up and easy to access.

Officers explained that Family Hubs would provide a combination of universal and targeted services, including parenting support, play and learning opportunities, health services and support for children with additional needs. They highlighted the importance of outreach and digital provision to ensure that services reached families who might not attend physical sites.

In discussion, Members raised concerns about partnership working with the voluntary and community sector. Officers explained that funding and infrastructure support would be provided to enable the sector to deliver services and to strengthen capacity. Members asked how the model would ensure accessibility for all communities. Officers confirmed that outreach, local delivery through partner venues and digital provision were central to the design.

Members questioned how Family Hubs would integrate with existing services, including youth services. Officers confirmed that the model was designed to create a continuous 0–19 (or 25 for SEND) pathway, aligning with youth partnerships and existing provision.

Concerns were raised about long-term sustainability. Officers confirmed that the model was designed to build on existing provision and partnerships, supported by three-year grant funding and ongoing Council investment.

The Committee noted the report and emphasised the importance of strong partnership working, accessibility and sustainability.

The Committee **AGREED** to make the following recommendation to Cabinet which applied to both the Best Start in Life Plan and to the item on Best Start Family Hubs

in Oxfordshire:

That the Council should ensure that sufficient resources are available to deliver the Best Start in Life Plan's ambition and to support achievement of Oxfordshire's ambitions for children, including the more stretching local targets for children eligible for free school meals.

29/26 SEND IMPROVEMENT NOTICE LETTER

(Agenda No. 9)

The Committee received a report on the SEND Improvement Notice and the Council's response.

Cllr Sean Gaul attended to present the report. He was accompanied by Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Laurie Baker, Deputy Director for Education and Inclusion, Annette Pennington, Strategic Lead for Education, Policy and Implementation, and Deb Smit, Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion.

In introducing the item, the Cabinet Member acknowledged the significance of the Improvement Notice and the broader challenges facing the SEND system nationally. He emphasised that addressing these issues would require sustained effort across all partners and that improvements needed to be both immediate and sustainable.

The Director of Children's Services explained that the Improvement Notice reflected wider system pressures, including increased demand, rising complexity of need and financial constraints. She set out the Council's response, which included developing a comprehensive improvement programme aligned with national SEND reform.

Officers described work underway to strengthen governance, improve early intervention and ensure more consistent provision across the county. They emphasised that the aim was not only to meet the requirements of the Improvement Notice but to create a more sustainable system overall, reducing reliance on high-cost specialist provision and improving outcomes for children and young people.

In discussion, Members sought assurance that progress was being made at an appropriate pace. Officers confirmed that a structured improvement programme was underway and that governance had been strengthened to provide clearer oversight. Members raised concerns about long-term sustainability, and officers reiterated that reforms were intended to deliver systemic change rather than short-term fixes.

Members asked about financial pressures, particularly the Dedicated Schools Grant deficit. Officers confirmed that this remained a significant issue and that the SEND Reform Plan would be critical in addressing it, including engagement with Government.

The Committee noted the report, commended the work of Steve Crocker, the Independent Chair, and all members of the SEND Improvement Assurance Board, and agreed to continue monitoring progress as part of its forward work programme.

30/26 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN

(Agenda No. 10)

The Committee **AGREED** the proposed work programme and **AGREED** that the November meeting should be all day in order to accommodate detailed scrutiny of the SEND Reform Plan if agreed by that point.

31/26 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER
(Agenda No. 11)

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

32/26 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS
(Agenda No. 12)

The Committee **NOTED** the Cabinet responses to its recommendations.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing

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