



# Buckinghamshire Council

## Children's & Education Select Committee

### Minutes

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHILDREN'S & EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 20 JANUARY 2022 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT TIME NOT SPECIFIED AND CONCLUDING AT TIME NOT SPECIFIED**

#### **MEMBERS PRESENT**

M Bull, Z Williams, P Birchley, K Bates, D Blamires, A Collingwood, M Dormer, R Gaster, N Hussain, S James, S Kayani, R Matthews, A Osibogun, P Turner and A Cranmer

#### **OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE**

S Carnall, G Drawmer, S James, P Kudhail and R Nash

#### **Agenda Item**

##### **1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

It was noted that Councillors Adoh, Summers, Jones, and T Wilson had given their apologies for the meeting.

##### **2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

- Cllr N Hussain declared a personal interest as a Governor at Pebblebrook School.
- Cllr S Kayani declared a personal interest as a Chair of the Dyspraxia Foundation and as an employee at Bourne End Academy.
- Councillor K Bates declared a personal interest as a Chair of Governors.
- Cllr D Blamires declared a personal interest as the parent of a SEND child and a school employee
- Councillor R Matthews declared a personal interest as a School Governor and volunteer at Transitions UK.
- Zoe Williams declared a personal interest as an employee of Bucks Education Partnership and as a parent governor.

##### **3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the meeting held on 11th November 2021 be AGREED as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

##### **4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

The following question had been received, in accordance with the rules of the constitution, from

Mr V Nicholas, who has attended the meeting:

- (i) Would it be appropriate to include Slough as a statistical neighbour in the aggregated comparative analysis of the County's schools' performance? Certainly this would have relevance as regards the demographic profile of Burnham Grammar School and could also perhaps be relevant for several other conurbations within the County.

In answer to the questions, Simon James, Service Director for Education replied as follows:

- (i) Statistical neighbours are determined through the Children's Services statistical neighbourhood benchmarking tool, which is commissioned by central government and originally produced by the Foundation for Education research in 2007. The latest update had been made in 2021. A number of other local authorities deemed to have similar characteristics are designated as statistical neighbours, based on the range of background variables. Both by the Department for Education and Ofsted use this tool in their analysis when benchmarking local authorities. In order to ensure consistency in data reporting this is considered the most appropriate tool to use.

A further question was received from Ms M Myatt, who requested additional information on the attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and other children as a key issue for residents of Buckinghamshire. Although the question was received in line with the constitution, the scrutiny team has not received the question in time for the agenda publication. As the question requires significant additional information, the directors will respond to Ms Myatt in writing as soon as possible.

## **5 BUCKINGHAMSHIRE SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT 2020/2021**

Sir Francis Habgood, Independent Chairman of the Buckinghamshire Children Safeguarding Partnership highlighted the following key points regarding the annual report which covered the year to April 2021:

- The Children Partnership is made up of the three statutory partners, the local authority, the police, and the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) as the representatives of the health sector. These are equally and jointly responsible for all issues around safeguarding, which is a significant change from the Children Safeguarding Board.
- The year to April 2021 had been significantly impacted by the pandemic with a much higher volume of cases, many with significantly more complex or significant issues. Sir Habgood thanked all workers and volunteers involved in safeguarding issues. The report covered several key issues including:
  - (i) Contextual safeguarding (considering the context in which young people live and understanding when to start thinking about risks) emerged from a thematic review.
  - (ii) Thinking "family"; a theme which was raised in several of the sub -group reports considering that it was important to understand the family context of each case and include the needs of the parent and any particular risks that they might have
  - (iii) A robust tracker was now in place to ensure that; (i) recommendations are understood, (ii) the changes are embedded and (iii) the impacts are understood
  - (iv) 4 reports have been published but date back to incidents from 2016-2018 when the safeguarding teams were in a different position but important issues were raised relating to: safeguarding across borders, neglect, a baby, pre-birth procedures and youth violence
- Work continues on exploitation with a focus on ensuring that there is not duplication of work between the Adults Board, the Community Safety Board and this partnership board.

- Work would continue on the transition between young people and adults.
- Training has been heavily impacted by Covid-19. All training has been done online during the pandemic, and the offer would now be reviewed to assess the use of conferences, briefings and learning events to communicate key messages from reviews, policies and practices.
- All partners continue to fund their partnership to the same level, without any inflationary increases.

During discussion, comments and questions raised by the Committee included:

- Sir Habgood advised that face-to-face training had been affected by the Covid pandemic. The partnership no longer delivered all the training itself. At present, an Excel provider delivers training online. A return to face-to-face training was anticipated, as this would enable discussion between the number of different professionals involved in the process. Core and specific training is supported by a network of people from across different organisations and included training by the police or health sector to gain a broader understanding on different topics. Finally, the learning process would also include information delivered through briefings, learning events and virtual conferences as well as training.
- A Councillor queried whether the number of children missing from education (65) was of concern. Simon James stated that the actual number is significantly higher, however, it has reduced since Covid. The team is ensuring that those children are visited frequently, and Ofsted had confirmed that this is the case. The size of the team has also been increased.
- The development of the new 3-year business plan was progressing and a planning meeting had been held on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 2022, which representatives from children and social care, the police and health services had attended and where some key issues (e.g. safeguarding) were discussed. It was anticipated that a draft version of the plan would be completed for inclusion in the safeguarding partnership meeting in March. Sir Habgood thanked the Councillors for their offer of support from the council.
- In response to a question, Sir Habgood highlighted two benefits of having a single chair for the children and adult safeguarding boards, this being a recent development for Buckinghamshire. First, both safeguarding boards share some common themes, such as exploitation and domestic abuse, thus understanding the risks and how services are delivered across the boards was beneficial. Second, the transition between children and adults is critical, and there is a risk that the services are no longer offered to an individual at a certain age, despite their needs remaining the same. Currently, a review is being commissioned by the Adult Safeguarding Board, however, it links closely to Children's Services. It was anticipated that the results would be published soon.
- Sir Habgood informed the committee that roughly 60 % of the Partnership's expenditure is spent on staffing, and the majority of the remaining funds is spent on training. The exact figure is available on request.
- A member wished to know what joint strategic work, mentioned in last year's report, is planned over the next 12 months. Sir Habgood stated that the report covers up to April 2021, and that the ongoing pieces of work covering the links between exploitation and domestic abuse, and neglect would continue going forward. A task and finish group on the subject of neglect was led by Dr Leslie Ray, and drew on good practice around the country. It was currently working on revising the neglect toolkit. Strong links had also been made with the new Domestic Abuse Board.
- A Councillor was interested in the impact of the increasing number of children moving to Buckinghamshire from outside the UK on the service's existing workload. Sir Habgood explained that this issue has not been featured in the work of the partnership. Richard

Nash, Corporate Director for Children's Services, advised that children's services provided by Buckinghamshire Council serve all children in Buckinghamshire, as is the statutory expectation. These services were tailored to the individual needs of the children and their families, including understanding any cultural differences.

## **6 EDUCATION STANDARDS REPORT 2020-2021**

Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services, introduced the item and Simon James, Service Director, Education and Children's Services, highlighted the following key points:

- The Cabinet Member thanked all the pupils and schools in Buckinghamshire for their ability to adapt to the changes and challenges occurring throughout the pandemic.
- It was noted that the gap between the attainment of disadvantaged children and others has narrowed over the last 12 months.
- Exclusions have continued to remain very low in Buckinghamshire. This was a result of the hard work of teachers and support staff ensuring that the needs of children were met.
- The frequency of Ofsted inspections has significantly increased since September. Buckinghamshire's schools have been supported via the side-by-side programme and the school improvement team. The current inspection framework being used is significantly different to previously used frameworks.
- The support provided to schools in response to the pandemic highlights the strong partnership between the schools and the local authority. Support is offered in the form of supervision for head teachers and access to mental health support teams in schools for as long as it is required.
- 903 children are currently educated at home. This is a lower number than at the height of the pandemic and is in line with national average. The size of the team supporting these children has been increased and support is carefully being monitored.
- The report showed the hard work that had been undertaken by the schools and their staff, and Simon James noted that the schools were a real asset to Buckinghamshire.

During discussion, comments and questions raised by the Committee included:

- A member welcomed that the report considered the data produced over the past two years not to be a robust representation of Buckinghamshire's pupils learning due to the pandemic.
- It was also noted that most attainment results were not available in the 2020 report. It was hoped that after combatting the pandemic, a more comprehensive, data-heavy report could be presented with area specific information. There was confidence in the grades assessed by teachers.
- The report stated that the slight attainment gap between pupils receiving free school meals and others has narrowed. The side-by-side programme was the main body focusing on this. The Challenge board, a comprehensive and collaborative group between head teachers and local authority officers, further supported this issue by targeting individual children in schools where the progress was not as fast as desired. Furthermore, the Quality First Teaching programme ensures that teachers are confident and competent about meeting those needs.
- Simon James advised that overall he was very pleased with children's progress which continued to improve. A partnership across schools allowing selected schools to support others was working well.
- It was further stated that the report only showed countywide figures, and that it would be useful to receive a geographical overview of attainment figures to clearly see

strengths and weaknesses of different locations. Simon James stated that this could be made available on request.

- Simon James reported that breakdown of attendance figures could be provided to the committee as requested by a committee member. The Department for Education offered a daily return around attendance, which a dedicated attendance team was monitoring closely, particularly in relation to vulnerable children. The team worked closely with schools. Current attendance rate is roughly around 90 – 94 % and tended to be higher in primary schools.
- The BASH training session on SEN was praised and the team was committed to continue delivering such sessions.
- It was further stated that free school meal vouchers during the holidays and the holidays activities programme had been welcomed by many parents.
- The healthy activities programme for schools is to be continued, as ongoing funding is received from central government. Feedback received from head teachers was very positive.
- The Council is also facilitating a huddles programme, which enables school leaders to raise issues (e.g. school closures due to Covid-19) with both the school improvement and public health teams in the Council.
- Two members raised the point that despite the improvements seen in the reports, only one school in Buckinghamshire made it into the Sunday Times school ranking. It was advised that the margins between the ranks are usually very small (about 1 %). 89 % of Buckinghamshire's schools are good or outstanding. It was noted that a ranking is not the only measurement of how good a school is, and feedback from parents and school leaders is taken into consideration when working on improvements. Buckinghamshire Council also ranked third within the group of statistical neighbours
- Many members noted that the report provided an overview, but not enough in-depth data, especially compared to reports that have previously been received. The committee wished for more detailed data, measurable targets/actions and a breakdown rather than an average to allow Ofsted comparisons. Simon James acknowledged the comments from the committee and advised that more detailed data is available within reason if requested. He noted however, that splitting the data often results in very small numbers, which may not allow sound conclusions to be drawn. The Council does, however, have access to Ofsted grading reports and additional support is provided for underperforming schools.
- The committee was advised that the attainment figure gave a statistical value which is significantly higher than the national and statistical neighbours' averages. Work is continuously carried out to improve pupil's performance, e.g. through the side-by-side programme which allows well-performing schools to support other schools. Special schools were included in the Side by Side programme.
- A member commented that the action plan mentions local experts training teachers, which means teachers are taken out of the classroom, which, in turn, may disrupt pupil's education. It was suggested that instead, teachers could be seconded to work in other schools to support and upskill their colleagues for a term, allowing the school to make provisions before secondment commences. It was noted that the action plan for the Side by Side project focussed on intervention and prevention schools work to uplift school standards, and this could be shared with the committee. Headteachers reached out to help other schools, and worked with their middle leaders to ensure their work continued in their own schools.
- Simon James noted that information regarding Early Years attainment would be included later on once assessments post pandemic were received. **Action: Simon James**
- Simon James confirmed that grant funding from the Department for Education for the Side by Side Programme and Challenge Group would cease and advised that discussions

were being held at schools forums meetings in order to be retain the level of service when the funding ceases. He assured the committee that the teams are dedicated to offering a service bespoke to children's needs.

- A substantial proportion of children leaves education at the age of 16. Simon James advised that some form of education is mandatory until the age of 16. The Council works with colleges and post-16 providers as well as ensuring map pathways for young people to access alternatives to schools, such as apprenticeships or supported internships as a pathway to the workplace.
- It was noted that children looked after by the local authority for at least one day remain in the disadvantaged cohort for the next 6 years of their education. Vulnerable children (e.g. those in social care) who are electively home educated and those most vulnerable, receive the highest support. Thus, the team has been increased to support this area.
- In line with national trends, girls in Buckinghamshire tend to perform better than boys. This may be attributed to learning styles and exam processes. Work with schools is undertaken to increase understanding of this issue.
- It was hoped to include a champion for disadvantaged children within the 18 established liaison groups. 15 champions have been appointed, which have access to additional work led by the Education Endowment Foundation.

Much of the Side by Side programme's and Challenge Board's work was focused on particular age groups to implement strategies and interventions to narrow the key stage 4 gap.

- In response to a question, it was noted that the Council is currently in conversations with head teachers and governors about how to further support them. A bespoke offer is currently being prepared for local school governors. Once the offer was accepted, it would be agreed how to measure the impact of the measures.
- In conclusion of this item, Richard Nash, Corporate Director for Children's Services, paid tribute to the schools for doing an incredible job during the last few challenging years and ensuring education continued. He emphasised the value of the strong partnership with schools and the DFE. Finally he thanked Simon James and Gareth Drawmer and their teams for their contribution during the difficult past years. The Chairman echoed the comments and thanked the committee for their questions.

## **7 FOSTERING, ADOPTION AND SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP ORDERS**

The Chairman introduced the item by emphasising the Council's commitment to long-term, stable placements for each child, thus minimising the number of times a child may need to move. She highlighted the importance of integrated work to support each placement. Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services, commended the service and the hard work undertaken over the last few years adding that the service had been expanded in a digital way, which has produced good results.

Richard Nash, Corporate Director for Children's Services, welcomed Palvinder Kudhail, Service Director Children's Social Care, and Sandra Carnall - Head of Children's Care Services.

The following key points from the report were highlighted:

- The report sets out the key placement options for looked-after children in respect to fostering, both long-term and short-term, special guardianship orders, which provide a long-term option for children where the guardian has parental responsibility, and adoption, the most secure placement.
- Performance data in respect of recruitment of foster carers and adoptive parents is generally good, despite Covid-19 and lengthy court proceedings.
- 70 % of Buckinghamshire Council's looked-after children are placed with in-house carers,

which are likely to be local, enabling children to maintain local connections in the community and attend the same school.

- A recruitment strategy for the next three years is in place, which includes a recruitment campaign to ensure carers cater for all children's needs. A focus was placed on the need for child and parent placements, finding more foster carers from ethnic minority groups and placing larger sibling groups.

During discussion, comments and questions raised by the Committee included:

- It was noted that conversion rates in the recruitment and retention strategy seem to be dropping despite growing interest. It was also noted that single carers in particular seem to leave the system. The Council does return to these people to find out the reason for their leaving and whether they have an interest in returning to fostering. Standards for care are very high, and a comprehensive training programme is offered by the Council to increase retention of foster carers. Recruitment is mostly done through social media or existing foster carers. The pandemic had caused some single adopters to leave for different reasons including ill health, being furloughed and being unable to financially sustain their homes. Others had applied but then returned to work and could not then take up a fostering role. Where a foster carer had left or paused their role, the team gave support to them to see if there was anything that could be done to support them further. It was noted that due to the increase in time taken for court proceedings, children now stay in foster care longer, thus spaces for new children are limited.
- A member asked what percentage of Buckinghamshire children are accommodated within Buckinghamshire, and how many the Council could accommodate. Richard Nash advised that it is most important to understand and meet the specific needs of a child at any point in time, whether that be within or outside of Buckinghamshire. The recruitment strategy aims to have as many foster carers as possible dealing with a wide range of children, but it may not always be possible to do so.
- It was noted that the adoption process is less straightforward than fostering, and that less support is offered for adoptive parents despite making a lifelong commitment. Both processes are very rigorous and guided by national minimal standards. There is also an adoption fund that enables the Council to commission bespoke support packages. Some children were placed in "foster to adopt placements"; an approach sometimes used for babies.
- Councillors praised the child-centred focus by the teams in supporting children in this difficult area.
- Within the Children's Services departmental structure there is a specific position of an appointed officer for children's homes. The council is currently looking to recruit to that role as it is the most suitable form of supporting that area of the service.
- To improve the fostering and adoption service, the teams are consistently working within the national standards, reviewing offers to carers and how they are recruited and aim to prioritise issues raised in Ofsted inspections.
- A number of foster carers move forward to adopt the child in their care. Furthermore, there has been an increase in foster carers applying for special guardianship orders. A policy has been devised to enable the Council to guarantee payments for two years, which had made a difference to those wishing to adopt.
- Higher levels of support are offered to fosterers looking after older children. Many fosterers prefer to consider caring for younger children. Many of the out of county placements were for older children.
- The Mockingbird activity is a model where a cluster of foster carers is recruited specifically for a group of children who know each other. Funding has been received to pilot the programme.

- The chairman thanked members and officers for their hard work undertaken across the council and during the pandemic for children in the county.

## **8 WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chairman introduced the work programme which outlined the areas of the service's work to be examined by the committee over the forthcoming council year. The following points were noted:

- Councillor Stuchbury requested that as part of its forthcoming work programme that the Select Committee review how speech therapy is delivered, especially in light of changes that have arisen due to the pandemic. The service is now no longer provided in-house by family and children's centres. Simon James advised that this is something that can be considered for discussion in the work programme. The Select Committee supported the request to add this item to the work programme and it was noted that it would be helpful to have information on the history of how the changes came about before the item comes to the committee **Action: Simon James**
- The committee approved the rapid review scoping paper on the recruitment and retention of social workers. In response to a question, it was noted that funding was available for the next financial year for the additional 21 social workers recruited during the pandemic.

## **9 DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING**

The date of the next meeting of the Select Committee will be Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> March 2022 at 2.00 p.m.