



# Minutes

## CHILDREN'S SELECT COMMITTEE

Minutes from the meeting held on Friday 6 September 2019, in Mezzanine Room 1, County Hall, Aylesbury, commencing at 9.30 am and concluding at 11.45 am.

This meeting was webcast. To review the detailed discussions that took place, please see the webcast which can be found at <http://www.buckscc.public-i.tv/>. The webcasts are retained on this website for 6 months. Recordings of any previous meetings beyond this can be requested (contact: [democracy@buckscc.gov.uk](mailto:democracy@buckscc.gov.uk))

### MEMBERS PRESENT

Mrs P Birchley, Mrs I Darby, Mr D Dhillon (Chairman), Ms N Glover, Mr A Hussain, Mr M Hussain, Mr N Hussain, Mrs W Mallen, Mr B Roberts and Ms J Ward (Vice-Chairman)

### CO-OPTED MEMBERS PRESENT

Mrs C Pease and Mr M Skoyles

### GUESTS PRESENT

### OFFICERS PRESENT

Mrs K Collier, Mr G Drawmer, Mr G Morgan, Mr R Nash, Mr P Robson and Ms P Thompson-Omenka

#### 1 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

Mr Dhillon was elected as Chairman for the ensuing year.

#### 2 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

Miss Ward was elected as Vice-Chairman for the ensuing year.



### **3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were none.

### **4 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/ CHANGES TO MEMBERSHIP**

Apologies were received from Mr Brown, Miss Wood and Mr Collingwood. There had been two changes of Membership; Mr Hussain had replaced Mr Lambert and Mr Brown had replaced Mrs Sullivan. Mr Skoyles had joined the Committee as the new Parent Governor Representative, representing Buckinghamshire Primary Schools.

### **5 MINUTES**

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed and signed.

### **6 PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

Four questions had been received from Mr Miller (member of the public) in relation to Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) placements across Buckinghamshire and the council's projections of changes in placement demand. Additionally the feasibility of the use of the Penn School site for specialist SEND placements was also questioned. In response to questioning Mr Drawmer, Head of Achievement and Learning, responded:

- It had not been a simple task to predict the changes in requirements for SEND placements, as although SEND prevalence had risen within the population, the nature of children's needs hadn't been easy to predict.
- The service area had been working on the sufficiency strategy which would benchmark and predict future SEND needs within the Buckinghamshire population. The strategy would be completed by February 2020.
- The data from the sufficiency strategy would become available to interested parties, upon request, to justify why the service area had formed particular conclusions from the data
- The potential re-designation of schools might be a possibility following the completion of the sufficiency strategy and depending on findings. The service area would work closely with any individuals affected and any data which had led to decision-making would be shared with any interested parties
- Any decisions to create additional school sites would only be made after sufficiency strategy completion. The Penn School site would only be considered if it was economically viable, if it was in the correct location and if it was available at the time that it was needed.

The Chairman thanked Mr Drawmer and requested that Mr Miller contact the service area again if he required further information.

### **7 CHAIRMAN'S REPORT**

The Chairman thanked Miss Callaghan, Service Director Education, for her time at Buckinghamshire County Council and wished her well in her new role. He also welcomed Ms Thompson-Omenka as Acting Service Director Education.

The Chairman gave updates about the Committee's informal meetings with Buckinghamshire Social Workers which had taken place over the summer period and said that feedback would be provided to assist the Service Director. A fostering and adoption briefing had also taken place and the Chairman commended officers within the service area, who had been working hard to improve the fostering and adoption service.

Committee Members requested that an outstanding social worker visit to the High Wycombe office was rearranged and that the Service Area made information about the latest Buckinghamshire A-level and GCSE results publicly available. Representatives from the Service Area explained later on during the meeting that the High Wycombe office had been part of a refurbishment project, so access had been restricted, and that results for A-levels and GCSE's had not yet been verified, so therefore could not be released.

**ACTION** – Committee and Governance Advisor to liaise with service area

The Chairman expressed that he had received a number of concerned and disgruntled communications from local parents, about home to school transport, and for this purpose he had invited Mr Robson, Head of Integrated Transport, who discussed issues with the Committee Members.

Mr Robson updated the Committee with the key issues that had negatively affected the home to school service over the summer break. There had been ICT and call system issues, plus additional problems with the payment system. At times, parents hadn't been able to speak with customer service representatives or leave messages at the call centre. The service had been fully operational since 3<sup>rd</sup> September and they had dealt with most issues through contingency measures, but equally they acknowledged the undue stress and disruption which this had caused parents and children across Buckinghamshire. Passes had been hand-delivered to the Schools to ensure children could travel on the first day of term and all 4000 young people who had qualified for free transport had managed to get into school on the first day of term. The service area had learned from the incident and would be introducing a new system for pass distribution and telephony processes. The main concern had been around paid-for-transport. Mr Robson stressed that it had been clearly stated within the council's terms and conditions that paid-for-transport is not available for every child and only if there is an available seat. There would be a significant impact on budget if all children were to be offered a paid-for-place, as it is subsidised by the council and any changes to use during the academic year had created risks to the budget.

A Member of the Committee suggested that places for more vulnerable year 7 students should be prioritised and that places could be taken away from students who were in year 11 or older, as they were more experienced and more able to be independent. Mr Robson agreed that this could be a direction which the service area could explore.

In response to a Committee Member's concerns about SEND provision, Mr Robson reassured them that there hadn't been many issues with SEND provision and that he would be happy to look into any reported incidences after the meeting.

The Chairman questioned the service area as to whether children who had no safe walking route to their school placement were still able to access a form of public transport to be able to attend their school placement. Mr Robson told the Committee that he had actively been working with the commercial transport sector to create new services for this purpose. He expected a further 30 services to be commissioned by November, but stressed that the council no longer had any governance over these commercial services, due to the decommissioning of public services to the private sector. In general the commercial sector had been very cooperative when ensuring safeguarding procedures had been in place for school children using their services and had signed a contractual agreement to ensure these remained in place.

The Chairman thanked Mr Robson for attending and delivering his update.

## **8 CABINET MEMBERS' QUESTION TIME**

The Chairman welcomed Mr Hussain, Deputy Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, who had substituted for Mrs Cranmer.

The Committee requested that Educational Psychology updates and EHCP reports continued to come to Select Committee meetings on a quarterly basis so that Members were kept aware of a current picture from within the service. Mr Hussain agreed to the report being presented at the proposed frequency and stated that the reason the service area had thought that it would be unnecessary to bring the report had been due to the fact that the backlog of EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan) completion had been cleared and the service area were now on top of the situation. Members of the Children's Select Committee requested that they continued to receive reports so that they had oversight of staffing issues, completion dates for EHCP's and so that they could monitor performance. The next update would be brought to the November meeting.

The Chairman thanked Mr Hussain for his contribution and moved to Mr Whyte's update.

Mr Whyte, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, thanked the Children's Services staff who had assisted with the recent event which celebrated the success of some of Buckinghamshire's looked after children. He told the committee that the event had been very impressive and that he had been moved by many of the care-leaver's speeches. He also thanked businesses across Buckinghamshire who had sponsored the event.

Early help had been launched during the first week of September 2019 and the service area had been delivering clear communications to all stakeholders so that they would understand how the new service operated. Certain actions had been delayed over the summer period, while the legal challenge had been in progress, but they would now be able to progress with

those actions and ensure that all sites would be utilised for child-related purposes. The service area had been making good progress with the children's home site in High Wycombe which was at the stage of awaiting planning permission.

The Chairman thanked Mr Whyte and moved on to the next item.

## **9 OFSTED MONITORING VISIT UPDATE**

Mr Whyte introduced the item as the third monitoring visit from Ofsted, which provided an update on Buckinghamshire County Council's improvement journey and a review of the progress they had made. He told the Committee that the visit had taken place a few months ago, so further improvements had progressed within the service area and he welcomed Mr Nash, Service Director Children's Social Care, who provided an operational update.

Mr Nash told Members that Ofsted had deemed the service area's self-assessment to be accurate and said that there had been steady improvement progress. There had been some staffing issues and high turnover in some departments which had affected workforce stability, but this situation had been improving. Despite challenges with caseloads, the staff who had given feedback to Ofsted said they enjoyed working at Buckinghamshire County Council. Mr Nash praised the hard work of front-line Social Workers and had been happy with staff morale levels. He had worked hard to ensure all staff felt supported and he remained committed to ensuring that the right people were coming into the service. Overall the service area had been pleased with Ofsted's last review.

In response to questioning from Committee Members, Mr Whyte, Mr Hussain and Mr Nash said:

- They would be establishing useful key performance indicators (KPI's) to measure and report back on the success of the new early help model. It would be a challenge to measure how they had diverted families away from social care. This update would come to the January CSC meeting
- Mr Whyte would monitor early help and ensure all aspects of the model work, including partnership working
- Councillors could refer families who needed help directly into the family support service using the more proactive and flexible online service
- Complaints had reduced over the last 14-15 months and new data says that visiting regimes were improving.
- They had a good system to manage all eventualities and put contingencies in place to ensure visits to families were timely.
- Gaining access to families had sometimes been problematic when families hadn't wanted social care involvement or help
- Schools would all receive a designated early help contact to assist with partnership working and improve the chances of referral through schools
- The service area had been taking action to improve staff morale where it had been low. The High Wycombe office was due to be refurbished to improve the working environment for staff based there

- The service area had been creating good avenues for communication between professionals and for improving working relationships, such as through monthly open days which they had hosted
- Heads of Service had prioritised the management of worker's caseloads along with Managers, to ensure all caseloads were achievable
- Children who go missing from care are always offered a return home interview and this doesn't form a one-off event. In all instances, social workers and partner agencies had tried to establish why a child had gone missing with the aim to stop it happening again and reduce the risk of exploitation. Some children had refused these interviews or would only speak to certain people and this had been reflected in the latest Ofsted monitoring visit.
- All visit recordings had been digital. Heads of Service continued to work with individual Social Workers on the quality of their recording as it continued to be variable. There had been an upward trend of improvements within the service and they would continue to eradicate poor quality recording practices
- The Senior Management Team tended to use more imaginative and less formal classroom-based training with Social Workers. This had included talks on focussed topics, such as domestic violence, and the use of good training resources
- Recruitment of good Social workers continued to be a challenge, both at local and national level. The service area continued to find it hard to attract the right people into the organisation, while in competition with other local authorities.
- There was a focus on growing and developing Buckinghamshire County Council's own staff and they had ten staff in the development pipeline.
- Mr Whyte was unsure when Ofsted would be visiting to reassess the grading, but he estimated that there would be 6 monitoring visits prior to the reassessment. As the 4<sup>th</sup> visit had been scheduled for October, Mr Whyte said that the full re-inspection could be around April 2020.
- Particular teams within the social care service had experienced ongoing retention problems. These tended to be within teams which required a lot of support within the roles, such as the help and protection teams, where children had been subject to child protection plans
- When monitoring the causes of staff leaving, the service area had ensured they had triangulated a range of data sources to find non-biased reasoning. Common reasons had included performance issues and the nature, intensity and difficulty of the role.
- There had been a large focus on the wellbeing of all staff within the service using proactive conversations and visits from Heads of Service. Some staff members within the service were now trained as Mental Health First Aiders, to be able to support their colleagues.

The Chairman thanked Mr Nash, Mr Hussain and Mr Whyte for their contributions.

## **10 EDUCATION STANDARDS**

Mr Hussain, Deputy Cabinet Member for Education & Skills, introduced the item by informing Members that the data within the report was from the previous year as results for this year hadn't been validated. He gave an overview of the report and invited questioning.

A Member raised concerns about underperforming pupils, the progress 8 report and issues within non-selective School ratings, as these had consistently underperformed during the Member's term in office. He was assured by Mr Hussain that particular measures had been put in place to enable these issues to be remedied.

Ms Omenka-Thompson, Acting Service Director Education, informed the Committee that GCSE and A-level final results would not be validated until much later in the year and that a lot of improvement work had been taking place through the side by side project which had been led by Mr Drawmer, Head of Achievement & Learning.

Mr Drawmer gave an update on side by side project actions and achievements. He stated that progress 8 measures had been favourable and that disadvantaged pupil scores had been above national average for attainment 8. The gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers had been narrower than across other authorities in the UK. Several side by side project strands had been put in motion within schools, to improve this situation. This had included delivery of the specialist teaching service and 18 locality liaison groups, who had been provided with seed money to look at areas of under-performance. The locality liaison groups would be working on 2 year research projects which had the aim of improving outcomes for pupil groups who had been underperforming by providing best practice guidance which would be shared by professionals across Buckinghamshire.

A Member stated that they would like to receive data which pertained only to students within Buckinghamshire, as the data provided referred to Buckinghamshire Schools, and had contained a high percentage of students from out-of-area. Another Member questioned the basis for comparison which had been used in the report, voiced concerns that the reduction in EHCP's may have meant that students who needed them, weren't getting the assistance they needed and questioned whether the service area had made good use of existing excellence which had been available.

Mr Drawmer informed the Committee that the side by side project had been delivered at no cost to the receiving school and by releasing teachers from other schools, while using transition and brokerage grants to fund any costs that had arisen. Mr Drawmer had worked closely with the Buckinghamshire Teaching Alliance to ensure the maintenance and strengthening of links with local schools.

Members questioned the reasons why girls had outperformed boys and asked whether the curriculum had been slanted towards girl's abilities. Mr Drawmer said that there had been no clear reason for this but that potential causes could be found in developmental differences, social conditioning and differing expectations in particular settings. Side by side would be exploring girl's and boy's attainment in detail. Inclusion had also been a primary goal within the

Education and Skills Strategy as Buckinghamshire County Council wanted to remove all barriers to achievement, for disadvantaged pupils.

A Parent Governor Representative (PGR) asked about what the Council had done to address school selection and placement shortage issues, as there had been issues with children gaining placements at local schools, if a school had a good reputation and Ofsted rating. Mr Drawmer said that they gave Schools three classifications when they had been identified as needing assistance - intervention, prevention or enhancement. Schools received support based on their identified needs. There had been issues with assisting Academy trusts, as these were not overseen by the council, but trusts had continued to work with them in most instances. Where a school had a large catchment and had been classed as a good school, BCC had focused on creating additional capacity and new placements by planning and executing building work. A lot of focused work had taken place on schools that had not yet been classed as good and the service area expected changes to their grading during the next inspection cycle, which is usually within 4 years.

A Member stated that based on the secondary school applications received in 2019, there had been the potential that 1 in 5 children attending Buckinghamshire schools didn't live in the county. Mr Drawmer told the Committee that criteria is based on distance, so it is incredibly unlikely that applicants who lived a long way out of the county would be successful, but that he would look into the figure, as some schools do border other counties.

**ACTION** – Mr Drawmer to investigate the figure of out-of-county children attending Buckinghamshire Schools with the Transport and Admission teams

A Member requested data which reflects Buckinghamshire children instead of the Buckinghamshire schools so that a clear picture of their performance could be gained. Ms Omenka-Thompson said that it would be possible to bring a further report in future which focused on vulnerable groups, grammar schools and differences between non-Buckinghamshire and Buckinghamshire student performance. The Committee agreed that this would be welcomed.

**ACTION** - Ms Omenka-Thompson to timetable a report which addresses issues raised within the meeting

A Member sought assurance that BCC had been keeping keen oversight on schools which had been exempt from Ofsted exemption to ensure that standards didn't slip. Mr Drawmer said that the vast majority were rated as good schools, and that some had been rated as outstanding, so therefore had been exempt from inspection. Ofsted continued to inspect 10% of outstanding schools each year and also inspected them if they changed from school to academy status. In future, Ofsted would be considering removing the exemption from outstanding schools. Mr Drawmer said that BCC had positive and open relationships with schools and that they had worked closely with them to facilitate improvements, if schools had voiced concerns that there had been particular issues which Ofsted hadn't picked up on. Schools had also regularly been invited to best practice and supportive conferences.

The Chairman thanked all contributors.

## **11 ELECTIVE HOME EDUCATION**

Mr Hussain delivered an overview of the report to the Committee. He emphasised that any parent can choose to home educate their child and that local authorities could request that the child is returned to an educational placement if they don't think their home education is sufficient. If parents were to refuse and the authority had real concerns about a child then this had often ended up in court. He welcomed Mr Morgan, Head of Early Help, as the operational lead and they both invited questioning from Members.

A PGR asked about how the service area had collected data to track the reasons behind parent's deciding to home-educate their children. Mr Morgan told the Committee that reasoning had been sought but finding commonality of reasons had been difficult. There had been no clear correlation, as the cohorts had been so different.

A Member questioned why the data stopped being collected when a child had reached year 11, as children had been required by law to stay in education until they reached 18 years old. Mr Morgan said that home education monitoring only went up to year 11. Older children fell into the Not in Education, Employment or Training category (NEET). NEET tracking is undertaken as part of the new early help structure within Buckinghamshire. Post 16 education and training activity is monitored and reported on monthly.

A Member noticed that there had been a peak in children being removed from their school placements by parents, during the primary to secondary transition years, during 11+ testing and GCSE examinations. Mr Morgan stated that reasons for this had been varied; some had been dissatisfied with the placement offered, some had experienced too much pressure in high performance schools, some hadn't felt that they had the right EHCP support. About 64% of home-educated children had been from the secondary cohort.

Mr Morgan told the Committee that there had been no common causality identified nationally and that figures for home-educated children had a 20% year on year increase. Parents had become more aware that home education was an option for their child which had contributed to increased figures. The council would continue to check and challenge parents about the progress which their children had made, in comparison to a school setting, as the reality of providing home education to a child had often been different to what parents had expected.

A PGR questioned whether the parental ability to provide home education had been monitored by BCC. Mr Morgan said that all parents were able to select elective home education for their child and currently the Council visits all parents who had made this choice. The DfE is currently consulting on proposed changes to EHE which will if implemented would increase the Councils responsibilities in this area.

Ms Thompson-Omenka said that there had been concerns with the rise in home-educated children nationally and, anecdotally, with the increased risk of safeguarding issues this could bring. Ms Thompson-Omenka didn't think it was wrong for parents to home school their

children, as long as the quality of their education had been of a good standard, and that the decision hadn't been taken because of the failings of a previous school placement. The council would work hard to ensure all 679 home-educated children were safe and were getting a good education.

A PGR asked about the terminology of Children in Need (CIN) and was informed that this referred to children who had an open safeguarding case with Children's Social Care and who were being visited by social workers to monitor any concerns. Approximately 4% of home educated children had been within this category.

The Chairman thanked all contributors and closed the item.

## **12 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chairman updated the Committee on future agenda items.

## **13 DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The date of the next meeting will be 3<sup>rd</sup> October at 1pm, in Mezzanine 1, County Offices, Aylesbury.

**CHAIRMAN**