



# Buckinghamshire Council Children's & Education Select Committee

## Minutes

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHILDREN'S & EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 11 NOVEMBER 2021 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 2.00 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 3.30 PM**

### **MEMBERS PRESENT**

P Birchley, K Bates, D Blamires, A Collingwood, M Dormer, S James, R Matthews, P Turner, M Bull, Z Williams and T Wilson

### **OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE**

A Cranmer, A Howard, S James, R Nash and H Slinn

### **Agenda Item**

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

It was noted that Councillors Adoh, Hussein, Jones, Kayani, Osibogun and Summers had given their apologies for the meeting. Councillor Gaster had notified the Chairman that he might be late to the meeting.

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

Councillor K Bates declared a personal interest as a Chair of Governors.

Maggi Bull declared a personal interest as a Governor of two schools.

Tony Wilson declared a personal interest as a Trustee of the Oxford Diocesan Bucks Schools Trust.

Councillor R Matthews declared a personal interest as a School Governor and volunteer at Transitions UK.

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

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 9<sup>th</sup> September were reviewed. It was noted that:

- The report on the Buckinghamshire Challenge Board would come back to the committee in January 2022 as part of the report on the Education Standards Board
- Councillor Anita Cranmer and Dr Tim Jones should be added to those in attendance
- Councillor S James had submitted apologies for the meeting

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the meeting held on 9<sup>th</sup> September be AGREED as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

The Scrutiny Officer read out the following question which had been received, in accordance with the rules of the constitution, from Sarah Hodges:

(i) Does Buckinghamshire Council have any plans to implement an EHC Hub a digital platform supporting engagement, contributions and collaboration on EHC assessments, plans and reviews. Parents/guardians, staff and professionals can spend considerable periods of time chasing information which could be accessed online providing up to date information to all parties; and

(ii) Are there staff recruitment and/or retention issues within the SEN department and associated support services which causes delay to statutory timescales.

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

##### **(i) Digital platform for EHC needs assessments**

Between April and July 21, we piloted a new online portal for inputting, logging and tracking EHC needs assessments. The idea will be that schools, professionals and families can all input into the system as part of the EHC needs assessment process. We have rolled this out to all schools since September 2021. This is for all new EHC plans. The next phase is to train and roll out with families. A longer term aspiration is to use this system for the annual review process of EHCPs as well.

##### **(ii) Staff recruitment and retention**

There are recruitment and retention issues in the SEND service that have particularly struck the statutory service over the past six months. This has not directly impacted performance for new EHC plans but has impacted the annual review process. This is directly link to a significant increase in demand that the service has been experiencing over recent months. We are working to improve our service, particularly in relation to the administrative elements, to enable business continuity, retention of staff, and service delivery to our families.

The Chairman noted that Mr Viv Nicholas, who attended the meeting' has previously wished to submit a question to the committee that had fallen outside of the rules of the constitution. However, at the Chairman' s discretion, Mr Nicholas was permitted to briefly address the committee.

#### **5 CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE**

The Chairman introduced the newly appointed co-optees to their first meeting of the Select Committee: Maggi Bull, representing the Catholic Church; Tony Wilson, representing the Anglican Church and Zoe Williams a Parent Governor representative.

#### **6 SEND IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY**

The Chairman noted that this item related to four distinct areas of council working as stated in the Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice 2015. The council had been working hard under the eight priority areas detailed in the reports to provide extensive support to children and young people across the county.

Councillor Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Richard Nash, Corporate Director of Children's Services, Simon James Service Director - Education, Hero Slinn, Head of Integrated

SEND and Andrew Howard, Chairman of FACT Bucks spoke to the report.

Councillor Cranmer introduced the report noting the progress made to support children and young families in Buckinghamshire. Richard Nash noted the high level of importance and prioritisation given to SEND work at the council.

Simon James summarised the report, noting that improving outcomes for child with special educational needs was a priority for the whole county of Buckinghamshire and the Special Educational Needs Strategy had been published in January 2020 to support this work. The report related to both children with Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs), with significant long-term needs and those needing SEN support. The council was pleased with improvements made so far against the seven priority areas in the strategy but would be relentless to improve services further in the future in partnership with parents and the report also focussed on the next steps to do so. The SEND Board provided oversight and governance for this work.

Andrew Howard, Chairman of Families and Children Together (FACT), noted that families with SEND children were challenged in different circumstances and at different times, therefore experiencing the support available in different ways. The council service was working hard to address the challenges experienced by families. FACT worked at a strategic level, and had seen a significant shift in attitude towards service provision in this area. Further resources were now directed to SEND. Strategically it was hoped that the services would develop further over the next few years.

In response to questions from committee members it was noted that:

- There had been an increase in EHCPs but that the number in Buckinghamshire was in line with the national average. The numbers of EHCPs for children with autism, special needs and those with social, mental and emotional health had increased further. Sufficiency work was directed to addressing this issue. The end of the year would give a clearer picture of the numbers as those age 25 moved out of this reporting mechanism.
- The service was experiencing significant increased demand and thus was moving towards a banded funding system, implemented on a phased approach, enabling schools to plan better their provision for children. A new manager would be in place in November to look at improving processes relating to funding reaching schools in a more timely manner following an EHCP.
- 1200 replies had been received in the 2020 FACT survey of parents. Feedback was mixed depending on whether parents had received the services they required or not. Many parents reflected a positive experience of special schools and many schools had given a high level of support but additional issues had been raised through the Covid pandemic and some schools had struggled. It was clear that certain groups of children had been affected in different ways. The service aimed to be agile to adapt to these needs.
- Support for schools requiring help to provide for children's needs included maintaining communication with schools especially during the pandemic, in-reach and outreach support, inclusion units within schools which were sharing information and working with council services for example' educational psychologists.
- Each priority area detailed in the Improvement Programme was supported by an impact group which reported the progress made on improvements to the monthly Improvement Board to ensure monitoring was both sufficient and recorded. The quality assurance of work was considered to be very important.
- Preparing for Adulthood was a priority and a Lead Officer had recently been put in place to lead on this, focussing on the needs and pathways for careers and into employment for this group of young people
- Measures to help children transitioning into year 7 included the increase in Identification

of children requiring SEN support. In addition schools are made aware of the ordinarily available package of help as well as encouraged to think about what support children would require before reaching year 6. Three new posts were being set up to help children going into year 7.

- The data of the needs of children in special schools and had been analysed in depth enabling the extension of provision in schools and special units before waiting for the publication of the sufficiency strategy. The data would be reviewed each year, and it was felt possible to publish a 5-year strategy based on this work
- The Early Years team prioritised identifying children's needs as early as possible and getting the appropriate educational setting.
- The Shout Out for SEND conference focussed on the pathways and independence of young adults and provided links with employers. Roadshows would be going into schools and the council officers would also provide schools with the resources to provide these roadshows themselves.
- The aim was to increase the number of apprenticeships and internships.
- The Local Offer, provided by the Bucks Family Information Service, was under-used by parents and the aim was to encourage the awareness and accessibility of this.

## **7 SEND EDUCATION SUFFICIENCY**

The Chairman introduced the report noting the need to provide sufficient places for children with special educational needs and disabilities within Buckinghamshire. The Chairman thanked the Officers and the Cabinet Member for the extensive work undertaken to support children and young people with these needs. Councillor Cranmer noted that the work detailed in this item fed into the work undertaken in the strategy.

Simon James noted the connection with the previous report, aiming to find places for as many children as possible within Buckinghamshire and to provide sufficient appropriate educational places for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. Collaboration work involved detailed communication with all special schools, inclusion units, FACT Bucks and primary, secondary and special school headteachers. 310 responses had been received about the six key proposals in the public consultation in June 2021. 84% of responders agreed the proposals were right or partly right. 16% did not agree with the proposals. The next stage would be to develop the SEND sufficiency strategy and plan, engaging with stakeholders and taking into account the consultation responses received.

In response to questions from the committee members the following points were made:

- Weekly meetings with the DFE gave support to this work
- Regular communication was held with the Regional Schools' Commissioner who welcomed this work on sufficiency
- Post 16 is a priority, and representatives from Bucks College Group attended liaison groups to understand which students required a care plan. Work was underway to improve the quality of the offer to this group. Work also focussed on routes into employment and training from special schools.
- The service would listen and adapt to the responses in the consultation. Work would take place over multiple phases. There was a possibility of opening a new school for children with social, mental and emotional issues, and expansion of some current schools. Mapping work of educational places against proposals was underway. Andrew Howard noted that this work was significant and FACT Bucks was grateful for this.
- More challenging behaviour was now being experienced, particularly from children that has not been able to access all the help they required during the pandemic, and it was the service's intention to target those children who needed the most help.
- In depth work on children placed in out of county settings had been completed and was

reported in a report to the Schools Forum last September. Last financial year, some children were brought back into placements within the county. Many of those children had a primary need and the strategy aimed to bring more back into county, especially those with social, emotional and mental health needs where there had been a significant increase in numbers. 3% or 148 children with EHCPs were currently placed outside the county. It was noted that occasionally, a child's needs were not able to be addressed in county.

- A feasibility study had been undertaken at Alfreton School which showed it was not possible to convert the boarding provision to day provision. It was important to ensure that all children with a similar need received access to the provision. On-going this school would be part of the overall solution for respite care.
- Stony Dean and Pebble Brook facilities provided high level provision for independent living.
- Parents living outside the county could apply to facilities inside the county. The aim would be to find as much provision as possible for children within the county.
- Over 1000 out of approx. 85,000 school children in Buckinghamshire in total, which included those with special educational needs, were currently home educated but the numbers were starting to drop as confidence increased in the education service. Approximately 60 with EHCPs were home schooled but this number remained consistent.

## **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:

- The rapid review group on the recruitment and retention of social workers would commence in January, following the adoption of the scoping document.
- That for the benefit of newer committee members it would be useful to have an overview of the mainstream work in education in Buckinghamshire. This would be considered with the Officers.
- That the reports going to the January and March committees were noted

RESOLVED that the work programme be AGREED

## **9 DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The date of the next meeting of the Select Committee would be Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> January 2022.

CHAIRMAN

The meeting concluded at 3.30 p.m.