



Buckinghamshire Council Children's & Education Select Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHILDREN'S & EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 7 SEPTEMBER 2023 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 10.02 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 12.46 PM

MEMBERS PRESENT

J Ward, M Dormer, S Adoh, K Bates, L Clarke OBE, I Darby, S Kayani, Dr W Matthews, A Osibogun, D Summers, T Wilson and N Hussain

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

R Nash, A Cranmer, G Drawmer and K Sutherland

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllrs Diana Blamires, Susan Lewin, Caroline Jones and Paul Turner.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- Cllrs Bates, Clarke, Darby, Hussain and Osibogun all declared a personal interest as a school governor.
- Tony Wilson declared a personal interest as a trustee of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire School Trust.

Cllr Sophie Kayani declared a personal interest as an employee at Bourne End Academy and a Policy Advisor for the Dyspraxia Foundation.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 15th June 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

It was agreed that the information that had been circulated to members at nos. 12,13 and 14 on the Minutes Action Addendum would be shared with Cllr Hussain who had recently rejoined the Select Committee.

ACTION: Scrutiny Manager

The Chairman invited the Cabinet Member, Cllr Anita Cranmer to make a statement at the start of the meeting in connection with the recent RAAC concrete issues in schools, which had been reported in the national press. The Cabinet Member reported that there were three schools in Buckinghamshire which were impacted by the concerns about the safety of RAAC concrete –

Waddesdon Church of England Secondary School, St Joseph's Catholic Primary and St Michael's Catholic School. Fortunately, none of the three schools had serious or widespread issues. For example, at Waddesdon the problem was restricted to the school's restaurant area, so children have not been significantly impacted. Whilst the Council was not responsible for the maintenance of academy or faith school's buildings, the Council was responsible for ensuring that children can access education so officers had been working with schools to try and ensure that remote learning would only be implemented as a last resort.

The Cabinet Member ended by thanking all the officers and headteachers who had been working hard to resolve these issues ahead of term starting. Committee Members had some questions for the Cabinet Member and the main points were as follows:

- A Member who represents the ward where St Michael's is located noted that there had been ongoing issues with a planning issue at the school over the past year and they were disappointed that officers had not kept them informed of developments, as both a local member and a corporate parent.
- Gareth Drawmer explained that as a voluntary aided school of the Catholic Diocese of Northampton, St Michael's Catholic School was responsible for the upkeep of its estate, although in the past year the school had transferred into a Catholic Academies Trust. Surveys had shown that there was a structural issue in part of the school, which was closely monitored until it reached a stage, in the autumn term, where it was considered to be unsafe. At that point, the Council liaised with the school, the Trust and the Diocese to ensure that the education of the children would be able to continue and fortunately Stokenchurch Community Centre was able to offer a space at short notice which enabled children to have their lessons there. The school's own Communications Officer liaised with local members at the time.
- Officers were thanked for their support to the Headteachers concerned. It was noted that there may be other schools who might be affected in future and a member asked if all schools had been surveyed and the survey results shared with the Council. It was reported that all maintained schools had been surveyed and that there were a small number of Academies that had not yet submitted their audits to the Department for Education (DfE) and these schools would be chased up to encourage them to submit their data.
- Members reiterated that it was important that parents were reassured about their children's safety because even though many schools were academies and responsible for their own school estate, parents would look to the Council for reassurance. Gareth Drawmer reiterated that statutorily, academy schools should be communicating with parents about any safety concerns on their school site.
- A Member commented that this should be seen as an opportunity to assess Council maintained schools and put a maintenance plan in place. Whilst it was recognised that there wasn't a vast budget to undertake all repairs swiftly, it would be helpful to have a comprehensive and up to date list of maintenance needs.
- Gareth Drawmer explained that in schools some budget was devolved for elements such as painting and decorating but more structural issues, such as windows or roof replacement schemes, would be the responsibility of the Council and Property Services had a comprehensive list of works that were needed.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and officers for this update.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were none.

5 PLACEMENT SUFFICIENCY STRATEGY

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services and Richard Nash, Service Director - Children's Social Care to the meeting. Richard Nash explained that he wanted to provide the Select Committee with an update on the placement sufficiency strategy in light of national challenges around placements. The following main points were noted:

- The number of children looked after (CLA) in Buckinghamshire had remained relatively stable at around 500 over the past five years although it was important to recognise that children were coming in and out of care all the time
- The report set out a variety of CLA data sets, a number of significant challenges for the service and the priorities for the future in terms of tackling these challenges.

The Chairman invited members' questions. In response to questions and during subsequent discussions, the following main points were noted:

- Changes to the context and demand for placements can be rapid. –
- It can take up to 6 to 8 weeks to find an appropriate placement for a young person and during this time the temporary situation is managed as best as possible, while intensive work is undertaken on a case by case basis.
- It is possible to help children with complex needs by supporting them with stability and supportive relationships. Some placements which were created when there was no alternative have been very successful. We intend to expand the number of places in children's homes ensuring the appropriate level of staffing and numbers of beds.
- Our children's homes are staffed at the correct level but it is getting harder to recruit all the related professional staff for several national and economic reasons.
- For younger children we prefer foster carers. There are some foster carers in Buckinghamshire that are fostering children who come from outside the area. Trying to attract foster carers is very important and various methods are used to do so including social media, all staff briefings. You would need a spare bedroom to become a foster carer. Some potential foster carers commence their training but then their personal circumstances change and their training is not completed. The Council is proactive in recruiting and ensuring that foster carers have the full training and that they are supported strongly. The council is aware of the concept of "It takes a village to raise a child".
- Foster carers receive an allowance but a discussion about level of incentives to encourage foster carers is ongoing.
- There is a fostering recruitment team which works in conjunction with the communications team to produce appropriate recruitment information.
- The council is very aware of the greater national recognition of the placement crisis and our placement team works full time to analyse all options available nationally and even then it is often not possible to find appropriate solutions. A government paper has realised that there needs to be some grouping to tackle the issue on a locality basis but it is difficult to say when this will bring results. Our team working on the issue of semi-independent placements with the aim of expanding capacity. However demand outstrips this work.
- We are mandated to take unaccompanied asylum seekers under the age of 18 which adds pressure to the system.
- Conversations have been held cross-border on creating more children's homes but results are likely to be 12 months plus ahead. In the meantime staff are supported to do this difficult work.
- Richard Nash and Sandra Carnell are the contact points for any private providers wishing to set up a children's home in the area. There are both planning and Ofsted compliances

- to be met but it is unusual for private providers to contact us.
- There are lower percentage differences between genders in the younger age groups. UASC changes the dynamics between genders in the older age groups – as most of these are male. Most UASC are not cared for in foster care but more likely in semi-independent accommodation so affect the numbers of those in foster care indirectly.
 - We have recruited staff to work evenings and weekends to support children directly in care and deal with crises as they emerge.
 - Most UAS children are distributed to us via the National Transfer Scheme. We ascertain if a young person wishes to reside in Buckinghamshire and if not then we suggest that they should be placed elsewhere. We aim to understand their individual needs and identity in doing so. The proximity of London to Buckinghamshire causes some issues to us.
 - Unregistered provision relates to children under the age of 16 who we have been unable to place in registered provision. The Service Director of Children’s Social Care monitors these placements on a weekly basis. Our priority is to ensure their safety. In terms of continuity, children are with us only as long as they need to be. For those under the age of 10 we are seeking permanent placements. Some children are with the same foster carers for several years and for some this goes beyond the age of 18.
 - There are currently around 120 foster carer placements in Buckinghamshire.
 - Placement change is the metric we use to monitor the number of placements and placement stability. A request for the committee to see the placement change data.
 - **ACTION: Richard Nash**
 - There have been examples supply and demand issues which have impacted on the placement of our children with private providers. The shortage of places results in the costs of available placements being pushed upwards.
 - If a care leaver has been in care with us for over 12 weeks prior to age 16 then we have a legal responsibility to look at provision over the age of 18. If they have a mental health need then we speak to the appropriate services to support them. All our care leavers have a personal care plan. The corporate parenting panel has a sub-group which looks at housing and tenancies for care leavers, however supply and demand issues has impacts into housing provision.
 - Post the age of 18 the service also monitors ongoing evidence of good relationships between care leavers and the authority where there is eligibility for a service. The authority aims to support the post 18s as effectively as possible and ensure that the work of the personal advisers to each care leavers is of appropriate quality.

6 PRINCIPAL SOCIAL WORKER ANNUAL REPORT

Richard Nash introduced the annual report of Amanda Andrews, our Principal Social Worker setting out work in previous year to support and promote social work practice. The role is part of the Practice Development Team, working closely with audit and quality, as well as the work with the assisted in first year social work academy. The focus had been into the recruitment and retention of social workers, learning from audits and ensuring transfer into practice and enhances the learning of the teams. The PSW listens to the teams and disseminates good practice, so the role is a key one.

In response to Councillors’ questions the following points were made:

- Dip samples were used to investigate single cases and would be assessed in a short time period. An audit is more a detailed investigation which is undertaken alongside a social

worker and their manager. Using both methods of checking work gives great benefits, covering a wider variety of work. The bar for meeting the grading of “good” is high. There is a direct relationship between the recruitment and retention challenges experienced and levels of social worker experience with cases not reaching the standard level of “good”. Such a case might reveal that the focus given to it did not relate strongly enough to the plan of the child in question. It would not indicate any risk to a child or not receiving a service. The team always strived to improve and the service improvement trajectory was upwards.

- There is a structure around career progression, taking into account the needs of the service, the ambitions of the individual and the available evidence. Sometimes employees are ready to progress but may chose not to. We are looking at the whole service at the moment which will open up new opportunities. Many teams are very specialist so sometimes opportunities are limited. We encourage employees to progress.

ACTION: Richard Nash to investigate the option of adding age and gender of newly qualified social workers into future reports.

- Career progression panels meet on a regular basis. Gaining a higher salary within the same team is only possible when a vacancy occurs.
- There are over 7000 vacancies nationally and not enough social workers so the social work academy has been expanded to address this issue. Some leavers have experienced issues relating to the cost of living crisis and moved to a less expensive area. The service assesses the overall picture at a given time and respond appropriately to this.
- The primary service focus is about good outcomes for children and young people rather than process. Dip sampling and audit work were linked to performance monitoring. Check and challenge meetings looked at these to assess them.
- Some candidates have stated that they are attracted to Buckinghamshire because of our well-being offer and this offer has received some awareness outside of the county. We will keep reviewing this offer to keep it relevant to current circumstances.
- Links are made to higher educational providers to encourage students into the social work academy. We attract students nationally and it is important to ensure we attract the right students.
- Parental alienation is captured within delivered course areas, although not as a specific separate course.

ACTION: Richard Nash to circulate information as to which courses cover parental alienation.

- All social workers need to be registered with Social Work England annually and undergo professional development. Most training is run in-house. Each social worker takes responsibility for their own learning and developing their own career.

7 UPDATE ON OFSTED WORK

All local authorities have an annual meeting with Ofsted. At our recent Ofsted meeting, three inspectors attended and received a presentation by our Officers on the work of the department. The letter in the agenda was the response from Ofsted as an account of the meeting.

In response to Councillors comments the following points were made:

- The Buckinghamshire Challenge work had commenced four years ago to address the issue of the attainment gap at all stages of children’s lives across Buckinghamshire. As a result of work, a project handbook had been produced for schools to use to work collaboratively with the Education Endowment Foundation

to address the issues. The handbook was launched in June and communication relating to this were sent to councillors.

- The Opportunity Bucks project has an education sub group which would ensure that information was escalated to others including to the Opportunity Bucks Boards.
- The availability of apprenticeships would be flagged to Bucks College and Bucks Business First so that young people were aware of them and that they are accessible.
- The January 2023 Education Standards report showed data relating to attainment. We have not yet received full information relating to all secondary schools so will be bringing outcome data of the recent academic year in January 2024.

Action: Richard Nash / Gareth Drawmer to discuss with the Corporate Director the level of information which it is possible to share relating to schools' attainment in particular relating to the 10 wards focussed on in Opportunity Bucks

- Buckinghamshire is a large area with diverse communities and we need to ensure services are aligned with them. In Opportunity Bucks wards there are larger numbers of pupils with the pupil premium and therefore there is more funding to use. In 187 areas, headteachers have challenge champions to go back into groups of schools to support the methodologies to reduce the attainment gap and support inclusion.
- The gap has narrowed more at secondary level. 2022 figures were the first set of full figures since the pandemic and most authorities have seen large numbers of changes since before the pandemic. Key stage 1 and early years are a focus going forward and there are some good indicative for the trends.
- 90% of our children are in good or outstanding schools. More are outstanding than good. Overall the standards are still high.
- There are national issues for recruitment into teaching. Together with the teaching alliance we are encouraging recruitment fairs to help this issue. Recruitment into teaching has fallen by 30%.
- Staff are supported with continuing professional development opportunities to further their career.
- We have a programme to develop headteachers. There is a two year induction programme with mentoring to ensure that they are supported as they need. Headteachers also have the option of termly supervision with the educational psychologist team. There is support for Ofsted inspections.
- There has been a significant rise in complaints to Ofsted. This is a national trend and not Buckinghamshire specific. We manage complaints robustly. Ofsted have said that our investigation of complaints is more thorough than required so we are assessing our triage system.
- For children with special educational needs our focus is on improving the support for the children and their families. There is a significant increase in demand for EHCPs. This gives a time pressure on staff.

The school improvement team has increased to help support schools. They work closely with schools in the side by side strategy but every school who hasn't received a visit last year, will be visited during this year. This is offered to academies as well.

8 WORK PROGRAMME 2023-2024

The Scrutiny Manager noted the items that would be coming forward to the November meeting of the Select Committee. It was further noted that the six month update of the "Review of the Pathways for Children with SEND" would come to the March committee meeting.

Suggestions for more depth work included looking at alternate provision and also fostering

children. Further ideas could be forwarded to the chairman.

9 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

2nd November 2023 at 2pm in the Paralympic Room, The Gateway