



Children's & Education Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's & Education Select Committee held on Thursday 25 January 2024 in The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF, commencing at 2.00 pm and concluding at 4.45 pm.

Members present

J Ward, M Dormer, S Adoh, K Bates, D Blamires, S Lewin, Dr W Matthews, A Osibogun, D Summers and P Turner

Others in attendance

Cllr R Stuchbury, K Dover, J Macilwraith, Cllr N Thomas, E Albert, A Sekhon-Gill and Cllr A Cranmer

Apologies

L Clarke OBE, I Darby, N Hussain, C Jones, S Kayani and Z Williams

Agenda Item

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Cllrs Clarke, Darby, Hussain, Jones, Kayani and Parent Governor co-optee Zoe Williams
Cllr Nathan Thomas substituted for Cllr Darby
Cllr Stuchbury substituted for Cllr Kayani

2 Declarations of Interest

Cllrs Bates, Osibogun and Turner declared a personal interest as a school governor within Buckinghamshire.

3 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 2nd November 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

4 Public Questions

There were no public questions received.

5 Youth Offending Service - Progress Update

Cllr Cranmer introduced Aman Sekhon-Gill, Assistant Director of Quality, Assurance and Standards. She explained that this is a very complex service area and reminded the committee that a Youth Justice Plan had recently been presented at Council as was required annually and had been circulated to select committee Members.

Ms Sekhon-Gill explained that the HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) had inspected the service a year ago, and this was a response to that inspection report detailing progress made to date against recommendations set out by HMIP.

The HMIP report had rated the service as good overall, with one area ranked as outstanding and one area requiring improvements. Ms Sekhon-Gill noted that an action plan had been produced to monitor progress and this was overseen by the Strategic Partnership Governance Board with partners being responsible for the delivery of services jointly.

The Chairman commended the service on the good inspection report from the HMIP.

In response to Councillors' questions several points were raised and responded to as follows:

- Ms Sekhon-Gill responded to a query regarding the number of youths who had not returned into mainstream education after offending, noting that it was a key priority and vital that education was resumed to enhance outcomes for young people. It would also help to drive down re-offending rates. A qualified teacher had been recruited into the re-offending team to help with educational support for reintegration and to assist with basic skills when outside of the educational system. There were no specific targets for re-entry into mainstream education as this would not be appropriate for all children. The Partnership Board looked at reintegration levels and quality assurance to understand the background to cases and address the relevant issues.
 - **Action:** Ms Sekhon-Gill to provide the committee with details of the reintegration targets into education or apprenticeships.
- In relation to a question as to whether children's ages were significant for their re-entry into mainstream education, Ms Sekhon-Gill noted that it was a nuanced picture and that the needs of the young person were central to successful integration, in addition to finding the most appropriate setting for them.
- One Councillor considered that the issue of abusers becoming

perpetrators of crime. Ms Sekhon-Gill explained that the service sees young people as children first, not as perpetrators and any interventions were tailored to the needs of the individual child. A very small percentage of children were noted to reoffend. John Macilwraith considered that an additional report to look at the types of intervention used could be brought to the committee in the future. This would assist the Select Committee in understanding the practices involved in the service.

Action: YOS to bring a further report on types of intervention as part of the 2024 to 2025 Select Committee work programme.

- Ms Sekhon-Gill explained that the training of staff was ongoing regarding the audit work and the service worked jointly with social care teams on this. All new staff members undertook training. The Partnership Board is responsible for the scrutiny of the work and how it is delivered.
- Ms Sekhon-Gill explained that as part of the “life path model” the service gains feedback from every child about their experiences. This feedback is collated quarterly and fed back into the Partnership Board and the actions are tracked.
- Ms Sekhon-Gill noted that prevention work had been strengthened. She outlined that young people are tracked for a period of 1-2 years after an intervention has been delivered to see if they re-enter the criminal justice system or not and this data is collected monthly.
- Regarding young people’s re-integration into mainstream school, Ms Sekhon-Gill explained that the service does not produce statistical data on this. Re-integration is child-led and thus is tailored for each child and could involve attending school, taking up an apprenticeship or attend a specialist school. The age of the child is relevant as most children of 16 or over attend college or start an apprenticeship. Younger children would usually attend school and take GCSEs. Ms Sekhon-Gill noted that encouraging appropriate volunteer representation from the community was an on-going piece of work.
- Ms Sekhon Gill explained that the service always strives for the highest standards. The figures could be impacted by a child moving house or re-offending. There was not a target figure to achieve but investigations would happen if the figure fell below 70%. The [Turnaround Programme](#) is a youth early intervention programme led by the Ministry of Justice. It was not known whether funding for this would continue in the future. This scheme was one aspect of the team’s strong prevention programme. The out of court tool had been updated and the Youth Justice Board are due to launch a standard tool which all authorities will be expected to adopt when published.
- Ms Sekhon-Gill confirmed that volunteers were a valuable resource and were always welcomed in the service. Their role could cover various tasks including accompanying a child to a police station or being present when the child attended meetings. She explained that there were regular offers

to assist the service from university students who wanted to volunteer as part of their studies, but there was always a need for more volunteers. Any help from Members to highlight this issue would be appreciated. Councillors suggested that Community Boards and volunteering fairs could be used to promote volunteering in the Youth Offending Service. Councillor Dormer invited the service to have a stall at the Amersham career fair.

Action: Councillors, Scrutiny Officer and Ms Sekhon-Gill to liaise as to how to link into Community Boards and events to raise the profile of volunteering in the Youth Justice System.

- Ms Sekhon-Gill explained that all volunteers were trained in restorative approaches. They were also offered supervision and had access to ongoing training from the youth offending team. New volunteers were paired with more experienced volunteers.
- Ms Sekhon-Gill explained that there was a cohort of looked after children in the Youth Justice Service but the number was small. The Partnership Board considered information as to whether offending occurred before or after entering the Youth Offending System. Schooling was always considered as part of the intervention plan and there would be a conversation if the child did not attend education. Re-integration was a gradual process, and a conversation was maintained over a period of time about the individual.
- 59% of young offenders had a learning difficulty in Buckinghamshire and this was not dissimilar the national trend. Young people who came into the service were screened by a speech and language therapist. The education and SEND officers were also involved. A child's learning needs were always treated as paramount.
- Ms Sekhon-Gill explained that the service was only able to track young people until the end of the court order. A young person could ask to remain in the service if they wished to stay in contact with their support staff.
- In response to the role referred to in paragraph 2.21 of the report, Ms Sekhon-Gill answered that the new jobholder had been appointed and had started in the week beginning 22nd January 202. This officer had been appointed to ensure that there are suitable supervision arrangements for children completing reparation projects.
- It was queried as to why there had not been such good progress with young people who had committed less serious offences, than those who were subject to a "Out of court disposal". Ms Sekhon-Gill explained that the out of court disposal was left to the local authority in terms of delivery model which can impact how services are then inspected against this area. The YOS has now ensured all out of court work is subject to the same scrutiny and quality assurance measures as statutory court

work.

- Although the service cannot make legal decisions but every child going through the system has a pre-sentence report written by the service detailing their views and their needs, the victim's views and the service's recommendations. The service's role is to advocate for the child. This includes helping them through the process and understanding their rights. The service works with the courts to understand how daunting the process can be for children. The service has consulted with children and young people regarding the language used to describe the service, and the preference was to use the title "Youth Justice and Support Service". Training was offered to magistrates to recognise how children may feel/behave when in the court process.
- Ms Sekhon-Gill explained that in some cases, oversight of a child can be retained despite child reaching the age of 18 to help them complete their order. If a child has a custodial sentence and has additional needs, this was made clear to the custodial setting. The Partnership Board is the place where partners can look at examples of particular cases and assess where barriers to service delivery can be considered and explored.
- Ms Sekhon-Gill explained that there were many prevention routes into the service for young people such as the Turnaround Scheme or via youth workers in schools. If funding for Turnaround ends, any young people already in the system will continue to be supported by the service. The team were looking at how to fund additional young people coming into the service.
- Ms Sekhon-Gill explained that historically there was a view that many young had come from certain backgrounds and communities, but this is not always accurate. The service tried not to focus on where the young person lived as the offence may not have been committed there. Errol Albert pointed out that where young people were exploited, there were no geographical boundaries. Those who exploited young people chose them on the basis of their vulnerability.

The Chairman thanked the officers for the excellent report and asked them to take her congratulations back to the team for their very good work and inspection outcome.

6 Children's Services Transformation Programme Update

Cllr Cranmer introduced Errol Albert, Service Director, Children's Services - Transformation and Improvement. She noted that the transformation programme was a long-term programme of work for the service.

Errol Albert explained that at his last appearance before the committee, he set out plans for the initial phase of service transformation. This report was to update the Committee on progress within those plans. The report included details of the rationale for change including increased demand, increasing complexity of cases, national reforms and the general overview of the service.

The report also detailed the feedback on the first phase of transformation, the key principles of which were:

1. A movement towards locality-based teams
2. Teams would be smaller, cohesive and multi-agency
3. Trusted lead professionals to work with families to provide timely support
4. A one-service approach to be paramount

This was a lengthy programme and there was still much to do. Family Hubs were significant for early help and support. Volunteers played a useful role.

In response to Councillors' questions during the following discussion several points were raised:

- Errol Albert outlined that in children's services, the focus should be on early intervention. Families' needs were dynamic. With community support early on, it may have been possible to keep some children out of higher-tiered intervention such as the criminal justice system. There are instances where referrals have been made where help could have been provided earlier. A wide range of issues presented to the service ranging from speech and language difficulties to family relationship problems. Seventy-five local authorities were quite advanced in organising Family Hubs and Buckinghamshire Council could learn from these. Where children were concerned, it was vital to intervene before a problem becomes a crisis.
- Errol Albert explained that the Transformation Board has oversight of the action plan. A significant part of phase one was the re-structure of internal staff. HR was an integral part of this and form part of the membership of the Transformation Board. Performance monitoring would be measured via several sources of data, for example from the police, health providers and the voluntary sector. Regular contact was maintained with DfE and OFSTED via inspections and annual conversations. The aim was to lower referral rates and re-referral rates. The lived experience of young people also would also be studied.
- John McIlwraith pointed out that transformation updates would be shared with Cabinet every six months. The select committee might wish to see more focussed information on particular areas of the transformation programme.
- Errol Albert explained that there could be several indicators of success. Currently, several teams involved with hand-offs of cases to each other and one assessment could involve three teams. Children have fed back that there are too many changes of social workers and that they have to repeat their story. It was important that young people develop a relationship with one trusted professional. A measure of success would be a lower number of hand-offs and an increased number of young people remaining with their birth families. When alternatives to a referral are widely used, this would also be an indicator of success.

- Errol Albert acknowledged that there has been a turnover of social workers and this would have an impact on the number of handoffs. He noted that this problem must be seen as part of the national picture. It will be a positive for social workers to know that they will belong to a small multi-disciplinary team with families at the centre.
- Errol Albert explained that transformation involves the whole system. It would be important to enhance communication between agencies. Where possible, multi-agency partners would attend the same training and briefing programmes. The service would be talking to schools about a shared space, which was an exciting opportunity.
- Errol Albert explained that all statutory duties and processes would be maintained during this transformation process. Families who were already in the system as the service was changed it is hoped would not be adversely affected. The locality model would mean that a family support worker will stay with the families alongside a social worker and other agencies. There would be no change to the way that safeguarding referrals from the community, school and volunteers were handled. In addition, the change in structure, every effort being made to maintain continuity to avoid a child having a new social worker. Staff are most likely to remain in their current area; the teams would just be split into smaller localities. Children and young people would be asked for feedback on the process.
- John McIlwraith answered a Member's question about the value of Teaching Assistants (TAs). He noted that TAs did a tremendous job and the aim was to recruit and retain as many as possible as they tended to help the most vulnerable children. He explained that the work of TAs is not strategically owned. Links would be made with headteachers to explore and develop opportunities for TAs such as promoting to a senior TA position and looking at other opportunities within services for children across the county. School head teachers often fed back that once TAs had acquired a skills set, they pursued a career outside schools. A Member noted out that TAs were employed on a Buckinghamshire employment contract rather than an educational one.
- John McIlwraith explained that he wanted to bring all the agencies looking after children together to support children from birth to 19 years of age (or 25 years of age for those with SEND). This was a huge piece of work. Errol Albert explained that the advantage of the transformation were the many opportunities to join services up and work with partners. Discussions were taking place with colleagues from the Early Years team. He would provide future updates to the Committee.
- Errol Albert outlined that "business as usual" would continue for services which support children and families. Residents would be directed towards Family Hubs by the Buckinghamshire Family Information Service (BFIS). Partners, early help staff, nurseries and schools will also signpost the hubs. The [Start for Life Programme](#), detailed on GOV.UK was very informative. He had every confidence that skilled staff would provide consistency to children and families.

- Ms Sekhon-Gill explained that the main aims of the programme were to elicit conversations with families in order to strengthen them. Staff would undergo continual training in a mixed cohort and deal with individual family needs rather than concentrating on a specialism. Staff wellbeing and resilience would be key to this. Errol Albert stated that the workforce would be equipped to support the changing landscape. There were pressing issues to deal with following the pandemic and localities were being mapped to ensure consistent geographical coverage.
- Ms Sekhon-Gill replied to a Member's question that trauma-informed training would be rolled out across the partnership, potentially to schools.
- Errol Albert answered a question about the lack of youth workers. He explained that there was more youth provision than there appeared but much more could be done to direct youths along a better path. John McIlwraith added that lack of youth workers is a challenge nationally, but it would be appropriate to work with partners in the voluntary sector. Errol Albert offered to give more information about the locality teams to anyone who requested it.
- A Member asked how the family hubs would be advertised so that awareness is county-wide. The Chairman added that the new service would need to be promoted and the level of service across all localities should be consistent. John McIlwraith explained that communication was key. Community Boards would be a good way of reaching residents and he and Errol Albert would be happy to attend Community Board meetings, community groups or groups of Members as it was considered important to communicate well about the transformation programme. Schools had Family Liaison groups which could help. John McIlwraith explained that community boards are very well-connected and could pass messages on to all age groups. The Chairman felt that Parish Councils could also play a part in communication.

Action: Councillors to contact JM/EA if they would like them to attend groups/boards to inform them about the transformation process.

- In response to a Member's question about signposting the new service model, Errol Albert agreed that there should be one point of information but pointed out that only the statutory services could be centrally controlled.
- A Member expressed a hope that SEND services would be transformed and that social prescribers and other healthcare professionals would be part of the locality teams. Errol Albert and John McIlwraith noted that they work closely with health partners and both are members of the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Health partners would be part of the locality teams.

7 Scoping Document for Review of School Attendance

School attendance levels have fallen since the pandemic and the committee

wanted to investigate this issue and see what could be done to improve the problem which was a national issue. John McIlwraith felt that the review would be very helpful.

The Committee agreed the scoping document for the review.

Any Member who wished to part of the review group could email the Chairman or Scrutiny Officer.

8 Work Programme

The Chairman invited suggestions for the work programme either now or later. Cllr Thomas was involved in the Autism Strategy. This would be presented to the Cabinet in the next few months.

9 Date of Next Meeting

Thursday 7th March 2024 at 2.00 p.m. in the Oculus, The Gateway