

BOURNEMOUTH, CHRISTCHURCH AND POOLE COUNCIL
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the Meeting held on 11 March 2025 at 6.00 pm

Present:-

Cllr S Carr-Brown – Chair

Cllr S Bull – Vice-Chair

Present: Cllr O Brown, Cllr P Canavan (In place of Cllr P Cooper),
Cllr E Harman, Cllr S Mackrow, Cllr D Martin, Cllr T Slade and
Cllr O Walters

Co-Opted Members: R Cornish

58. Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllrs P Cooper and B Hitchcock.

59. Substitute Members

Cllr P Canavan substituted for Cllr P Cooper.

60. Declarations of Interests

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

61. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 28 January 2025, were confirmed as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

62. Action Sheet

The Committee received an update on the actions outlined in the action sheet.

RESOLVED that the Committee note the Action Sheet and agreed for the items highlighted on the Action Sheet to be removed.

63. Public Issues

The following questions were heard by the Committee with responses provided at the meeting by the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People and the Chair:

The following questions were received from Mr Sofianos:

Q1

The paper rightly highlights concerns around childcare staffing levels. But there's another logistical issue: the vulnerability of nursery and preschool venues.

In my parish, the Mudeford Wood Playgroup is under threat, because the operators of the building unexpectedly gave notice to the group. Officers and local councillors have been working hard to support a resolution, but it's still very possible the Playgroup will disappear in July. This would be disastrous for local families.

Has the council analysed the overall provision across BCP, to identify similar vulnerabilities elsewhere? And what future support will it offer to providers who rent their spaces, to ensure they have long-term security, fair contract terms, and are charged reasonable commercial rates?

Answer from the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People:

Thank you, Mr Sofianos, for your question.

I am also worried about the plight of Mudeford Playgroup and I thank him for highlighting the hard work from officers and local councillors to try and find a solution.

The Council has a diverse range of childcare providers, including those who rent privately, those who lease space from a church or other organisation, and those who rent directly from us. While we do not have the power or authority to ensure fair rental rates for privately leased spaces, we do have the ability to influence rents for the providers who lease directly from the council. In these cases, we fully recognise the financial pressures childcare providers face and actively engage with them to understand their income and expenses on a case-by-case basis. Our goal is to set fair and sustainable rent that reflects both their financial situation and the essential role they play in our community. The Council works closely with the sector and is on hand to provide advice and guidance on a range of issues including financial sustainability.

Q2

The Scorecard at Appendix 1 doesn't share data regarding the Council's SEND workforce. However, delayed workforce data is now available on the Local Offer website.

This data suggests some volatility. In October 2024, 87% of plans saw a change of case officer. The proportion of agency workers was 21%. The staff vacancy rate was 21%. And the number of permanent Educational Psychologists had dropped from 12.4 in March to 8.6 in October.

This is a challenge for staff, and above all for the ultimate stakeholders: the families who depend on the service.

What is the current data for these staffing and vacancy numbers? And what reassurances can the Council provide that the improved service seen leading up to the recent OFSTED review will be retained afterwards?

Answer from the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People:

Thank you, Mr Sofianos, for your second question.

October 2024 was the period of time when the SEND Restructure was being implemented and there was a significant amount of reorganisation within the SEND Service as a result. This unfortunately did mean a high number of families will have experienced a change in EHC Co-Ordinator whilst this was implemented. The current data is now:

Monthly percentage of EHCPs that have had a change of worker:

- February 2025 – 3.5%

The percentage of agency workers

- February 2025 – 10%
- This is now the lowest rate it has been across the past 15 months

The staff vacancy rate

- February 2025 – 30.8%
- Recruitment is underway to permanently fill these vacancies

Number of permanent Educational Psychologists (FTE)

- February 2025 – 8.0
- This reflects current national difficulties faced by Local Authorities in recruiting permanent Educational Psychologists.

The SEND restructure has produced a long-term permanent service structure that will remain in place beyond any Ofsted Inspection. The Service and the Council as a whole is committed to continued improvement in this area. Whilst we are in a stronger position than we were 12 months ago, we are fully aware that we are only part through our improvement journey, and the resources and level of service will need to remain in order to continue to support our progress.

Q3

During January's Work Plan discussion, a question was raised around Permanent Exclusions & Suspensions. This had been scheduled for November 2024, but disappeared. It was suggested this was partly covered under Alternative Provision – but there's much more to this subject, and critically, the data wasn't made available.

I'd encourage the Committee to review this item in the autumn, after publication of the Government's annual data-drop. There's a growing crisis in the use of these sanctions, which disproportionately affect the most vulnerable children, especially those in poverty and with SEND. It deserves fuller analysis, and ideally, contributions from head teachers.

This and other discussions in that session hinted at a struggle to deliver strong scrutiny within the time and resources allotted. Doesn't this show that the group needs more meetings than currently scheduled, and will the Council support more sessions for this vital committee?

Answer from the Chair of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

Thank you for your question, Adam. I am going to reply to that as Chair of the Committee.

In November 2024, Children's Services officers confirmed that the item request regarding School Permanent Exclusions and Suspensions would be covered in the wider update on Alternative Provision. As a result, the committee proceeded with scrutiny of the matter on this basis, following the usual arrangements of consultation with the Chair.

I acknowledge the suggestion to review this item further at a later date, and as Chair I am minded to support this request. I will ask for the committee's view on this later in today's meeting when we discuss our work programme. A scrutiny request form has also been supplied to Mr Sofianos to allow him to provide further detail on his suggestion if he should wish to.

Meeting schedules for the Committee are determined by Council, along with all other public meetings. It is Council's responsibility to decide whether to allocate more meeting dates for the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee and any increase in meetings must be considered against the resources available to support all meetings of the council.

In terms of the total scrutiny time dedicated to this important area of the council's work, I would also like to highlight other work that takes place outside of formal scrutiny committee meetings. In the last year the committee has introduced informal briefings, in line with best practice, to share information to the committee which will enhance our scrutiny. These briefings are timetabled to take place on a regular basis throughout the year and are in addition to any working groups established by the committee which also take place outside of formal committee meetings but form an important part of the committee's work.

64. Members of Youth Parliament Update

The Committee was provided with a verbal update on the work of the Members of Youth Parliament (MYPs), including an update regarding their campaigns.

The Committee considered the update and made the following comments:

- In response to a query raised regarding the MYPs sports event, the Committee was advised that they had been in contact with a person

who had communicated with the local schools about the event to ensure its success.

- The Committee was advised that the event was a tag rugby tournament aimed at students in years 8 to 10, specifically targeting males, as that age group had been particularly vulnerable to knife crime.

65. Introduction of Health Representative Pam O'Shea

The Committee received a verbal introduction to the new health representative, Pam O'Shae, the Interim Chief Nursing Officer, which included details about her background and experience.

66. Speech and Language Therapy Update

The Service Manager, Children and Young People's Speech and Language Therapy (SALT) presented a report, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'A' to these Minutes in the Minute Book.

The service had embedded the largest changes to the delivery model, which were incorporated into the Standard Operating Procedures. Over the following years, we required partners in the wider system to support the implementation of the framework, with an end date for adoption by all set for 2027.

The service continued to evolve however, the main elements of the transformation for the Speech and Language Therapy Provider service were now in place.

The Committee considered the update and made the following comments:

- In response to a query raised regarding free training provided to child minders and what was available to families, the Committee was advised that for early years when a family comes to ready, steady, chat there was a variety of different forms of support that would be available to families depending on what would best suit the child.
- The Committee was advised that the Ready Steady Chat programme had no limit on the amount of time a family could access the service. This support also extended to in-school initiatives, where coffee mornings were organised. These events could be for an entire year group or specifically for parents of children registered with the service.
- In response to a query raised regarding the uptake of the services, the Committee was advised that there had been good uptake of the coffee mornings in schools, although the uptake of Ready Steady Chat had decreased.
- The Committee was advised that schools were actively working to support SALT. However, if there were concerns about the level of support a school was providing, the SALT team would meet with the SENDCO at that school. They would review what was currently

being offered and provide guidance on what additional support was necessary. For schools that were consistently struggling, the SALT team would collaborate to identify strategies that could be implemented together for maximum impact.

- In response to a query raised regarding the free SALT training and its contents, the Committee was advised that any early years provider could register for this free training. The programme included a workbook session followed by a two-and-a-half-hour development session.
- In response to a query raised regarding the cost of the support in schools, the Committee was advised that the support offered under the Link SALT Model was completely free in schools however, some more specialised training was part of a package that had a fee.
- In response to a query raised regarding how children with different support needs were addressed, the Committee was advised that when speech therapy needs were identified, the goal of the framework was to differentiate the levels of support required for children who may need access to additional specialised services.

The Committee noted the report and the update.

67. Children and Young People's Partnership Plan 2025-2030

The Interim Head of Performance presented a report, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'B' to these Minutes in the Minute Book.

Having a Children and Young People's Partnership (CYPP) Plan was a statutory requirement of Children's Services. It was a high-level strategic plan that outlined how to support children and young people living in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole with the aim to improve outcomes for all children and young people. The current plan had come to an end, and this was the new plan covering 2025-2030.

It was an important statement of the partnership's commitment to BCP's children and young people. Not only did it set out the priorities for services that support children and young people, but it also defined how partners would work with each other to deliver those priorities effectively.

The Committee considered the update and made the following comments:

- In response to a query regarding how children and young people were included in the survey, the Committee was advised that children and young people's views were a fundamental part of the engagement process. Which included working with various groups, such as MYPs. Children were involved at all stages, including scoping, identifying priorities, and refining those priorities. These groups provided feedback on the draft plan and designs.
- The Committee was informed that the number of children, groups, and those with protected characteristics that had participated in the survey would be shared with the Committee. **ACTION**

- In response to a query raised regarding the changes in the plan, the Committee was advised that the previous plan was not fit for purpose and did not adequately reflect the wishes and needs of children and young people. Furthermore, there was insufficient governance surrounding that plan, which was a symptom of a failing system.
- The officers agreed to share the finalised Children and Young People's Partnership Plan before it is presented at Cabinet. Additionally, it was agreed that the KPIs for this would be shared with the Committee. **ACTION**

RESOLVED that Members note the final content and design of the plan.

Voting: Unanimous

68. Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2024-25

The Head of Service Place Planning and Admissions a report, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'C' to these Minutes in the Minute Book.

The Council had a statutory duty to provide working families of children aged 0-14 (18 with SEND) enough childcare places in its area, where reasonably practicable. Each year Research and Children's Services colleagues assess the position of the market, providing parents, councillors, schools and private business ward level information as a planning tool to support access or expansion of places, while highlighting areas of focus for the year ahead.

With significant government expansion of early years childcare and wraparound care currently taking place, this information and data was vital for private businesses seeking to enter the market and help the Council fulfil its statutory duties.

The content of the assessment concludes that the Council was meeting its statutory duties. It was also important to highlight that, at the time of writing, the quality of our providers stands at 99.2% good or outstanding (compared to 97.8% in England).

In addition to a briefing paper (appendix A) the data that helped form the assessment is accessible [here](#).

The Committee considered the update and made the following comments:

- In response to concerns raised regarding the lack of childminder and preschool options in Boscombe West, the Committee was advised that 125 day nursery places were available. However, the area's housing situation had made it challenging for childminders to set up services. While there were limited options in Boscombe West,

suitable alternatives were within walking distance, with Boscombe East offering 326 places and West Southbourne offering 292 places.

- The Committee was informed that the service aimed to promote the value of childminders and the unique environment they provided for families seeking childcare in a home setting. It was a priority for the service to actively encourage, support, and engage with childminders to ensure that their concerns were heard, with the aim of promoting and facilitating childcare provision whenever possible.
- In response to a query regarding the ongoing issues with the Mudeford Wood Playgroup, the Committee noted disputes between the playgroup and the Mudeford Community Trust, which had been raised with BCP Council. While the council did not have a formal legal role, it provided advisory support to ensure parents and families had access to quality childcare. The service was exploring alternative site options with the preschool, though there were no guarantees due to time constraints. BCP Council was concerned about the impact on local children and families and aimed to maintain a child-focused approach in addressing the issues.
- In response to a query regarding the extended provisions for September 2025, the Committee was advised that families with children aged 9 months to 4 years were entitled to 15 hours of free childcare within a 30-hour week, increasing to 30 hours in September 2025. The service acknowledged the late announcement, which resulted in necessary changes being made on short notice but remained confident in meeting the targets for the expanded entitlement.

RESOLVED that Members note the final content and design of the plan.

Voting: Unanimous

69. SEND Improvement Update

The Director of Education and Skills presented a report, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'D' to these Minutes in the Minute Book.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Improvement programme of work had made significant progress over the past 12 months, including stabilising the workforce, improving plan quality and timeliness, and implementing a new SEND Sufficiency strategy. However, challenges remain in maintaining assessment timeliness and managing the growing caseload. Additional resources were needed to meet statutory delivery targets and improve service efficiency. Key focus areas included recruitment, enhancing the Local Offer website, and addressing the high use of Alternative Provision. The ongoing demand for new assessments and the impact on the Dedicated School's Grant (DSG) budget was also highlighted.

The Committee considered the update and made the following comments:

- In response to a query about the two most common issues families raised complaints about, the Committee was advised that historically, most complaints had focused on communication within the SEND provision. This area had since seen improvement. However, more recently, they had begun receiving complaints concerning the provision itself, primarily related to capacity and sufficiency.
- The Committee was advised that complaints about communication in the service arose from a disparity between rising demand and the number of available officers managing cases. Although the new structure had improved workload distribution among staff, further improvements were still needed.
- In response to a query raised regarding a previously submitted growth bid, the Committee was advised that it was declined despite aiming to address a significant increase in service demand. However, the service took steps to reduce reliance on staffing resources by improving processes, utilising technology, and streamlining operations to operate more efficiently with fewer staff members.
- In response to concerns raised regarding the reduced reliance on staff, the Committee was advised that maintaining the human element of the service remained a top priority. It was emphasised that the significance of a multi-agency approach to developing EHCPs. By utilising technology to streamline the planning process, case officers could save time and focus more on providing meaningful one-on-one interactions with families.
- In response to a query raised regarding the most cost-effective way to run the service, the Committee was advised that getting it right the first time was the best approach. However, financial constraints made it necessary for the service to consider other ways to meet its statutory duties. Additionally, early intervention work had the potential to positively impact this area, but it required careful management.
- In response to a query about the gap in the SEND budget and potential solutions to address it, the Committee was informed that the SEND system and landscape did not adequately serve the majority of stakeholders, which was a national issue. The service faced challenges in delivering support due to ongoing budget constraints. However, efforts were made to alleviate these challenges to ensure effective service delivery and to explore ways to reduce costs. Multiple approaches were pursued to manage this pressure as they moved forward.
- In response to a query raised regarding the service used for creating and delivering EHCPs, the Committee was advised that the service had ceased using Enhance. Instead, they had decided to bring the writing of EHCPs in-house, enabling high quality output.
- In response to a query raised regarding mainstream provisions for children and young people with SEND, the Committee was advised that the priority was to integrate children and young people with

SEND into their local mainstream schools, though some might need specialised provisions. The service emphasised the importance of monitoring suspensions and promoting collaboration with schools to ensure that adequate support was provided to those facing challenges in a mainstream setting.

- The officers agreed to share an update on the first free school, including current enrolment figures, and to update the Committee regarding the progress of the second free school. **ACTION**
- The officers agreed to share the full review of the DSG finances as well as the SEND improvement board's response to the review. **ACTION**
- The Committee requested an update on the ongoing work regarding education outside of school and home education and asked that it be shared with the Committee. **ACTION**

It was Proposed, Seconded and RECOMMENDED to better assess the impact on children, young people and families of any potential budget overspend in the SEND service budget, the Committee recommends that Cabinet requests a report be provided to Cabinet by June 2025 which outlines:

- **the likely overspend in the budget**
- **which areas have been identified to overspend**
- **the options to ensure the budget limit is met**
- **an appraisal of the impact on children and families of these factors.**

Voting: Unanimous

70. Portfolio Holder Update

The Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People provided a verbal update which included:

- An update on the recent positive OFSTED judgment was provided, with a letter from the Secretary of State expected to remove the DfE advisory role. The Portfolio Holder thanked the Children's Services team for their efforts.
- Information about the forthcoming SEND inspection was shared, with preparations ongoing, including a recent mock inspection to assess readiness.
- An overview of new governance structures that were set to be implemented on 1 April was presented, including the dissolution of the Children's Service Improvement Board and the continued involvement of Chair John Coughlan with the SEND Improvement Board.
- Welcoming Lisa Lynn Croft, the new director, who joined in February.
- An update on data-sharing initiatives among schools was discussed, focusing on exclusions and inclusions, with schools actively seeking insights to enhance inclusion efforts.

- It was acknowledged that children generally performed better in mainstream schools, reinforcing the importance of reintegrating them into mainstream settings whenever possible.
- The Portfolio Holder participated in a Community Safety Roundtable to discuss knife crime and its impact on youth.
- A visit to the newly opened BCP Council-funded facility at Canford Infant and Junior School was positively described, highlighting its support for pupils with speech, language, and communication needs, and emphasising the inclusive model of education that allowed movement between mainstream and special education settings.

71. Work Plan

The Committee was asked to consider and identify work priorities for publication in a Work Plan.

The Committee was advised of upcoming training with the Local Government Association and agreed to consider whether to add the Alternative Provision Improvement Plan to the work plan outside of the meeting.

The Committee agreed to add School Permanent Exclusions and Suspensions to the work plan for the meeting in November.

The meeting ended at 8.44 pm

CHAIR