

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

Minutes of the Meeting held on 25 November 2025 at 6.00 pm

Present:-

Cllr S Carr-Brown – Chair

Cllr S Bull – Vice-Chair

Present: Cllr O Brown, Cllr D Farr, Cllr E Harman, Cllr B Hitchcock,
Cllr D Martin, Cllr O Walters.

Co-Opted Members: Mark Saxby

Also in attendance: Ryan Cornish and Elliot Prentice

30. Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllr P Cooper.

It was noted that Cllr T Slade and Cllr S Mackrow attended online.

31. Substitute Members

There were no substitute members on this occasion.

32. Declarations of Interests

Cllr Simon Bull declared an interest in relation to Agenda Item 10 (Home-to-School Transport) as a family member was in receipt of home school transport.

33. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 September 2025 were confirmed as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

34. Action Sheet

The Chair highlighted the action sheet and advised the Committee that closed items would be removed.

35. Public Issues

The following questions and statement were received from Mr Adam Sofianos with the answers from the Portfolio Holder set out in response:

Q1

The Key Lines of Enquiry paper is an important work, and I thank councillors and officers for coordinating it.

It tells, indirectly, the story of SEND, from over-stretched services to under-supported children. And beyond the council experience, the situation is even worse, with many children waiting years to access diagnosis, struggling daily with their mental health, experiencing systematic unmet needs at school, only to be excluded from their community – because they were deprived of the support which they were entitled to under law.

This is a multi-layered crisis, seemingly without end. It falls to councils to try to do the best they can, despite it.

One overriding theme in the Enquiry is: how can the deficit be reduced? Does Council agree that it's just too big to significantly reduce, that service cuts won't deliver it, and that only widespread government intervention can achieve this?

Cllr Richard Burton, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, provided an answer as follows:

Thank you, Chairman, and thank you, Adam, for your question.

I would also like to thank you for the recognition and understanding of the situation as demonstrated by your question and agree with most of what you say. I've said most, actually, probably more than most, especially the bit that you said it falls to councils to try to do the best they can.

As always, we remain committed to improving outcomes for children and families with special educational needs and disabilities in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole. A recent Department of Education review recognised the significant progress that we've made locally: strengthening our partnership, improving governance and restructuring our SEND service. These steps are laying the foundations for lasting improvement.

But like many councils, the demand for SEND services and the cost of delivering fall outstrip the funding available from central government. This continued lack of government intervention to address the growing Dedicated Schools Grant deficit and the current system that has generated and is perpetuating it is not just a local issue.

It's a national crisis that requires urgent action. Without fair and sustainable funding systems, councils will be forced into impossible decisions, with devastating consequences for children and young people and families across the country.

That is why we are calling on government to act. Every child and young person in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole deserves the support they need to thrive, and that cannot happen without immediate reform to the SEND system backed by a sustainable funding model.

It is also why we commissioned this report to understand why BCP Council is experiencing a high deficit and similar authorities, and to endorse a package of improvement that includes early intervention, strengthened Education, Health and Care Plans oversight, expansion of local provision and improved dispute resolution.

These actions are designed to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND by reducing demand pressures and delivering better value for money by investing in what really makes a difference.

Thank you.

Q2

The data for suspensions and exclusions is heartbreaking. Sanctions here are above the national rate. FSM children are excluded 4 times and suspended 6 times more than other children. Those with SEN support are excluded 6 times more than peers. Children with EHCPs are suspended 8 times more than peers.

The report shows a vastly disproportionate impact on our most vulnerable children. It underlines the urgent need for earlier intervention, faster diagnosis, better awareness of trauma-informed practice, and a culture of inclusion embedded in all settings.

There are schools which already embrace these cultures – such as my local primary Highcliffe St Mark's, which – despite the same funding challenges as others – battles to support and develop vulnerable children. How can the Council use its best examples, to encourage and support improvement across the conurbation?

Cllr Richard Burton, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, provided an answer as follows:

Thank you again, Adam, for your second question.

We recognise the dedication and commitment that our local schools demonstrate every day in supporting our children and young people. We have several networks which allow schools to share best practice across the conurbation, for example Head Teachers, SENCO and Attendance Forum.

We also hold an annual education conference and at the last one, which I attended, a local Head Teacher shared how they enable children to develop a sense of belonging to their school community.

There was also movie input from practitioners from other areas of the country explaining their journey to become a totally inclusive establishment and the impact of a sense of real belonging has on their students. There is more details of this in the KLOE paper that's coming up.

We're also connected to regional and national networks, which ensures we can bring the best practice from across the Southwest and the country to

BCP. We are currently establishing a BCP Education Partnership Board, which will further improve collaboration across the conurbation.

The published suspension exclusion figures are always out of date by the time they have gone through due process and are made publicly available. It'll be interesting to see how they change over the next few years as these practices are enacted.

Q3

The agenda papers don't break down sanctions by school. But the Government's data does. The release of 2023/24 statistics show that 5 schools among 100 in BCP gave half of all permanent exclusions, and 6 schools gave almost half of all suspensions.

One school gave 1,148 suspensions in a schoolyear: the equivalent of 6 suspensions every single schoolday for a year.

In that time I read of local children suspended for having a period panic in class, isolated for having a short haircut, sanctioned for being unable to afford school uniform, and countless SEND children reporting unmet needs. Budgets might be impossibly restrictive, but school cultures shouldn't be. Yet there are few ways to hold schools to account.

Would the Committee consider inviting representatives from some of these schools to a future meeting, to discuss how cultures impact children, especially the most vulnerable?

Cllr Richard Burton, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, provided an answer as follows:

Thank you again, Adam, for your question.

There are several ways in which we support schools in understanding performance and approaches to alternatives, and suspensions and exclusions. These include data sharing and the utilisation of this data to target, support and challenge.

Data sharing also allows for robust discussion through several networks. For example, through the Head Teachers Forum, SENCO's meetings, and targeted attendance meetings. To strengthen challenge further, we are developing an Education Effectiveness Framework and Education Partnership Board.

We need to be careful not to oversimplify these statistics as we have a complex mix of different schools within BCP.

Cllr Carr-Brown, Chair of the Children's Service Overview and Scrutiny Committee also provided an answer as follows:

Thank you for that question, Adam.

I have brought this to the committee. We have had a discussion and of course it's an incredibly important area and issue that you raised. We also

acknowledge the stresses and strains on schools and what they are dealing with and those stresses and strains on parents.

We think that yes, inclusion is obviously a key element of any response that we build towards the central budget recovery, as well as being an intrinsically important issue for every single child in our conurbation. We would like to, in broad terms, seek to understand more about this and hear the views of schools. However, we need to do that within a scrutiny format. We have a committee here that has particular ways of doing things. We have to show that our test and challenge is there for the right reasons and it's carried out in the right way.

So what I'd like to do is take away your proposal, and we will discuss it in terms of our work planning and we will then scope it and see how we can deal with it most appropriately.

Thank you.

Statement from Mr Sofianos:

S1

With the Government's SEND reforms delayed, and services under colossal pressure, children's rights are under threat, and families need your support more than ever.

There are concerns that the Government will spend less money, that children could have less legal protections.

And some in politics are apparently using this moment to attack and delegitimise vulnerable children.

Reform deputy Richard Tice recently claimed there's a "crisis of over-diagnosis" among neurodivergent children.

Reform leader Nigel Farage has claimed Britain is "massively over-diagnosing... mental illness problems" and even claimed neurodivergent children were being diagnosed by GPs over Zoom.

These comments are ill-informed, divisive, destructive, and offensive, and should be condemned.

This is a dark time for vulnerable people. I urge all councillors to support SEND families, to use their voices to support the retention of children's rights, and to take that message to Government itself.

36. Members of Youth Parliament Update

The Member of the Youth Parliament provided an update of all the MYPs recent activities, which included:

- Participation in the House of Commons debate on issues affecting young people, with contributions on unpaid internships and knife crime.
- Appointment to the Youth Select Committee, currently focusing on standardising the PSHE curriculum. Written evidence has been gathered, and oral evidence sessions with organisations and the

Minister for Education are scheduled. A formal report launch is expected in March 2026.

- Delivery of the *Tackling Knife Crime Together* event on 1 October at Oakmedians Rugby Club. The event was attended by Dorset Police (including armed response and dog units), local partners, and pupils from Oak Academy. Activities included interactive sessions and a rugby game aimed at breaking down barriers between young people and the police.
- Engagement with the BCP Youth Forum to gather views on key issues and promote youth participation in decision-making.
- Plans for ongoing collaboration with partners to sustain the impact of recent initiatives and encourage wider participation.

The Member of Youth Parliament responded to questions from the Committee. The Committee commended the energy, commitment, and ability to use the platform to influence change. Members welcomed the update and offered support for future initiatives.

37. Verbal update from John Coughlan on SEND improvement Journey

The Committee agreed that this item be deferred to the next meeting of the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

38. KLOE High Needs Dedicated Schools Grant Expenditure: Benchmarking and Strategic Direction

The Director of Education and Skills and the Assistant Chief Financial Officer 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.

This report responded to a request from the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee key line of enquiry to benchmark BCP Council's High Needs Block spend and strategic direction against similar local authorities. The purpose was to better understand the wider context of the Council's High Needs deficit and identify potential strategies for improvement.

This report provided a strategic overview of BCP Council's High Needs Block position. It also contained comparative data and insights together with an evaluation of the effectiveness of measures taken to address the accumulated Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficit.

The report aimed to support informed decision-making and provide assurance that all reasonable actions were being considered to address the financial challenges within the High Needs Block, improve financial sustainability and outcomes for children.

The Committee discussed the report, including:

- In a response to a query raised regarding the scale of the High Needs pressures and joint lobbying, the Committee was advised that officers worked with other South West authorities, shared best practice, and used detailed data to strengthen engagement with the Government.
- In response to a query raised regarding anticipated Government policy changes, the Committee was advised that updates were expected in the New Year, with a likely focus on early support systems and multi-agency teams working closer to communities.
- In response to a query raised regarding the commissioning business case, the Committee was advised that the approach aimed to reduce EHCP numbers and reliance on alternative provision, although further work was needed on financial modelling.
- In response to a query raised regarding the engagement with schools and inclusion, the Committee was advised that openness and consistent data sharing were essential, and work was ongoing to secure borough-wide engagement.
- In response to a query raised regarding academy trusts, the Committee was advised that termly meetings with trust Chief Executives provided an opportunity for collaboration.
- In response to a query raised regarding IT systems, the Committee was advised that the SEND Dorset Intelligence and Insight Service supported early notifications and that the Synergy education management system was in place.
- The Committee was advised that AI tools are being used to assist with drafting EHCPs and refining content, but they do not replace practitioner input. It was noted that other local authorities are already using branded solutions for this purpose.
- In response to a query raised regarding post-16 provision, the Committee was advised that bespoke provision had been established urgently to meet immediate need, and steps were being taken to strengthen engagement with schools.
- The Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People advised the Committee that early intervention and multi-agency working were critical to addressing demand pressures and noted ongoing collaboration with other local authorities to share best practice.

RESOLVED that the Committee used the information in the report to support informed decision-making about the measures and actions necessary to improve financial sustainability. The Committee endorsed a strategic package of improvement that included early intervention, strengthened Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) oversight, expansion of local provision, and improved dispute resolution. These actions were designed to reduce demand pressures, deliver better value for money, and align with an emerging High Needs Block Recovery Plan. The approach demonstrated that the Council was actively pursuing reasonable, evidence-based strategies to address the High Needs Block deficit while improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

Voting: Nem. Con.

It was agreed that the Committee delegated to the Chair to work with officers to scope further work on this matter and to share the proposed scope with the Committee for agreement.

39. Permanent Exclusions and Suspensions

The Head of Inclusion, Places and Capital 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.

This report provided an analysis of permanent exclusions and suspensions across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP), with a focus on trends over time, comparisons with national and regional data, and the disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups.

Permanent exclusions in BCP had increased significantly in recent years, particularly in secondary and special schools. Pupils with special educational needs (SEND), those eligible for free school meals (FSM), and children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) were consistently overrepresented in exclusion data. While national guidance emphasised that exclusions must be lawful, reasonable, and proportionate, BCP's figures indicated that these groups continued to face higher rates of exclusion than their peers.

Suspensions had also risen sharply, with BCP's rates exceeding national, Southwest, and statistical neighbour averages across most phases. The number of pupils receiving one or more suspensions had nearly doubled since 2019/20, with the highest rates observed among pupils with EHCPs and those eligible for FSM.

This report summarised the policy landscape and national challenges, set out the council's strategic intent and framework for action and provided benchmarking data for permanent exclusions by phase, SEND status, and FSM eligibility, followed by a focus on suspensions data across the same dimensions. The analysis aligned with the ambitions of BCP's Children and Young People's Partnership Plan, which set out a vision for every child to lead a fulfilling and happy life. Reducing exclusions and improving outcomes for vulnerable learners remained a shared priority across the partnership and this was central to the work we had been doing to develop a BCP Belonging Strategy.

The Committee discussed the report, including:

- In response to a query raised regarding the impact of current work on exclusion numbers, the Committee was advised that while progress was being made, improvements would take time, with some early signs seen in attendance.

- In response to a query raised regarding consistency of engagement with schools and SENDCOs, the Committee was advised that work was ongoing to ensure a consistent approach and that the SENDCO forum was supported by senior officers. The next stage would include developing a toolkit to strengthen SENDCO confidence.
- In response to a query raised regarding isolation practices, the Committee was advised that schools were required to monitor isolation internally under DfE guidance but were not obliged to report this to the local authority, although it may be reviewed during Ofsted inspections.
- In response to a query raised regarding the three-tier alternative provision model, the Committee was advised that this was being developed to ensure appropriate use of AP and avoid overreliance, with a focus on quality and nurture-based provision.
- The Committee was advised that while there had been an increase in exclusions in special schools, this related to a very small number of pupils within a small cohort.
- In response to a query raised regarding the role of academy trusts, the Committee was advised that termly meetings with trust Chief Executives provided opportunities to strengthen collaboration and improve consistency.
- The Committee noted the importance of building trust and improving relationships across an evolving education system to support inclusion and reduce exclusions.
- The Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People advised the Committee that consistent engagement with schools and SENDCOs was essential, alongside developing the three-tier alternative provision model to ensure appropriate use and avoid overreliance.

RESOLVED that the Committee agreed to make Cabinet aware that the Committee appreciates the detrimental impact of school exclusions, which were highlighted in the report, and recognises the work that is underway to address this. The Committee agreed that through this work the council's primary focus is improved outcomes for the children of BCP but that this work will also likely bring budgetary savings such as:

- **A reduction in exclusions and associated costs (e.g. transport, AP placements, tribunal processes)**
- **Improved outcomes for vulnerable pupils, reducing future demand on social care, youth justice, and post-16 support service**
- **A reduction in the need for unregistered and costly AP as more needs are met by schools**

Voting: Nem. Con.

The Head of Inclusion, Places and Capital presented 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.

This report presented the findings of a strategic review undertaken by an external provider into the Local Authority's home-to-school transport arrangements, focussing on our arrangements and provision for children and young people pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The key objective of the review was to identify strategic and operational opportunities that supported the development of independent travel options and made improvements to how home-to-school transport was delivered with a focus on potential efficiencies and service improvement.

It identified key opportunities to introduce travel options that met individual needs and helped prepare young people for adulthood and promote long-term independence. Key issues included the complexity of transport arrangements, market capacity challenges, and the need for improved commissioning models that delivered better outcomes and value for money. The report presented a range of options and opportunities for future delivery and contained details of the investment necessary to achieve cashable savings and cost avoidance.

This report sought approval to proceed with a formal tendering exercise to commission an external provider to implement a phased delivery of change proposals that encouraged independent travel, built independence and reduced journey times for children and young people. The approach was supportive of young people's development to help young people gain confidence and practical skills for travelling safely on their own and would result in making school transport more efficient and sustainable.

The Committee discussed the report, including:

- In response to a query raised regarding the rationale for commissioning an external provider, the Committee was advised that specialist expertise was required to deliver independent travel training at scale and ensure best practice.
- In response to a query raised regarding the financial implications, the Committee was advised that the proposed investment was expected to deliver significant long-term savings and improve outcomes for young people.
- In response to a query raised regarding the impact on families, the Committee was advised that engagement and communication would be prioritised to ensure changes were introduced gradually and with appropriate support.
- In response to a query raised regarding safeguarding and risk management, the Committee was advised that robust processes would be in place to ensure pupil safety during independent travel training.

- Members queried why an external provider was preferred over an in-house solution. The Committee was advised that the external approach would bring specialist skills, deliver a phased programme at pace, and leave a legacy by upskilling staff, whereas an in-house model would take longer and lack the necessary infrastructure.
- The Committee discussed the three-year phased delivery plan and noted that the proposals represented a package of measures, including route optimisation, commissioning changes, and independent travel training, rather than a single intervention.
- Members raised concerns about balancing efficiency with child welfare and were reassured that route optimisation would be interactive and responsive to individual needs, ensuring journey times remained within statutory limits and that children arrived ready to learn.
- In response to a query raised regarding safe pick-up points and clustering, the Committee was advised that any changes would be carefully assessed to ensure suitability for vulnerable children and that flexibility would remain where individual needs required bespoke arrangements.
- The Committee was advised that future-proofing systems, including investment in route optimisation technology and performance dashboards, would support ongoing efficiency and monitoring.
- The Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People advised the Committee that the proposed approach aligned with the Council's commitment to improving independence for young people and delivering sustainable transport solutions.

Following a request from a Committee member to ask a question relating to the exempt appendix to this report, it was Proposed, Seconded and agreed to exclude the public and press at this point:

RESOLVED that under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 2 in Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act and that the public interest in withholding the information outweighs such interest in disclosing the information.

The Committee continued to discuss the report.

The Committee then resumed in public session.

RESOLVED that the Committee agreed to endorse the recommendation within the report to Cabinet to tender an external provider to deliver a transformation project over three years at a total cost of £1.5 million, funded by the flexible use of capital receipts, to deliver service improvements and, by the end of the project, ongoing savings in SEND school transport projected at £3 million (net of additional resource requirement).

Voting:

For:8

Against:0

Abstentions:1

41. SEND Sufficiency Strategy

The report was circulated for information only with no discussion in Committee and provided an update on the SEND Sufficiency Strategy.

42. Children's Services Key Performance Indicators Q1 2025-26

The report was circulated for information only with no discussion in Committee and provided Children's Services Key Performance Indicators for Q1 2025-26.

43. Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report

The report was circulated for information only with no discussion in Committee.

44. Children's Services O&S Data Use Toolkit

The report was circulated for information only with no discussion in Committee.

45. Portfolio Holder Update

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

- A follow-up on a question raised at the previous meeting regarding the proportion of Alternative Provision delivered online. The Committee was advised that this data is still not available due to limitations in the current case management system. The issue has been escalated to the system supplier, and alternative options will be explored, including the planned transition to Synergy next year.
- Confirmation that the Ofsted/CQC SEND inspection took place between 3 and 21 November. The Portfolio Holder thanked all staff, partners, and families involved. Initial feedback was positive, and the draft report is expected on 5 December, with publication anticipated around Christmas.
- Details of recent visits, including Court Hill Primary School, Merley First School, Bearwood Primary School, Avonwood Primary School, Bethany CE Junior School, and events such as the Youth Homelessness Action Planning Workshop, Dingley's Promise Poole site opening, Oak Academy new building opening, Foster Carer Awards, STAR Awards for care-experienced young people, and the opening of Linwood Post-16 Skills Centre.
- Upcoming Cabinet items: Home-to-School Transport and Youth Justice Service Plan, and Dedicated Schools Grant High Needs Expenditure Forecast scheduled for 17 December.

46.

Work Plan

The Committee noted the work plan in its current form.

The Overview and Scrutiny Specialist advised that annual work programming would be undertaken with the Committee in the new year. It was also highlighted that the Data Toolkit, listed earlier under the information items, was intended for adoption by the Committee. Members confirmed their agreement to adopt the toolkit.

It was explained that the toolkit would be incorporated into the work programme as a link and would provide a self-serve resource to enable easier access to data.

The Chair confirmed that work programming had not been forgotten and would be addressed in the new year.

The meeting ended at 9.33 pm

CHAIR