

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

Minutes of the Meeting held on 24 July 2024 at 6.00 pm

Present: Cllr K Rampton (In place of Cllr B Dove), Cllr S Bull,
Cllr P Broadhead, Cllr O Brown, Cllr P Cooper, Cllr E Harman,
Cllr B Hitchcock, Cllr S Mackrow, Cllr D Martin, Cllr O Walters and
Cllr S Carr-Brown

Co-Opted Members: R Cornish, P Martin, M Saxby and E Prentice

1. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Bobbie Dove and Simon Welch.

2. Substitute Members

Cllr Karen Rampton substituted for Cllr Bobbie Dove.

3. Election of Chair

Councillor Simon Bull took the Chair for this item.

The following nomination was received:

- Councillor Sharon Carr-Brown – proposed by Councillor Peter Cooper and seconded by Councillor Emily Harman.
- Councillor Philip Broadhead – proposed by Councillor Karen Rampton and seconded by Councillor Philip Broadhead.

The nominees explained their reasons for wanting to take on this role and their ability to fulfil it.

A secret ballot was held.

RESOLVED that Councillor Sharon Carr-Brown be elected as Chair of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2024/25 municipal year.

4. Election of Vice Chair

The newly elected Chair of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee presided over the election of Vice-Chair. Councillor Simon Bull was proposed and seconded for Vice-Chair and there were no other nominations.

RESOLVED that Councillor Simon Bull be elected as Vice-Chair of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2024/25 municipal year.

5. Declarations of Interests

Cllr Simon Bull declared an interest in relation to agenda item 8 as a family member was in receipt of an EHCP.

6. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 and 23 January and 19 March 2024 were confirmed as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

The Committee acknowledged the previous Members of Youth Parliament and thanked them for their hard work during their term, and welcomed the new Members of Youth Parliament onto the Committee.

7. Action Sheet

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

8. Public Issues

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

The following questions have been received from Mr Sofianos:

Q1

The SEND Improvement Plan refers to a strategy to improve inclusion in schools. This is good news and, hopefully, will be tracked by this Committee. Inclusion is the tide that lifts all boats and can improve school cultures and child wellbeing as well as educational outcomes. These are also, now, government objectives.

Key to this is support staff – particularly teaching assistants. Yet anecdotally, many local schools appear to be reducing teaching assistant roles, or losing TAs to better-paid, lower-stress jobs: in supermarkets, or cafes. Knowledge and experience are being lost.

Inclusion is more than just providing more mainstream places to SEND children. It needs, among many other things, resources.

Teaching assistants are a crucial but dwindling part of the school workforce. How does the Council plan to protect and support their roles, and those of other key support staff?

Answer from the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People:

I totally agree with you that recruiting and retaining the right people to work as classroom assistants is an issue. For many years I worked with

classroom assistants and fully understand the difference that they can make to the education of children and young people and the skills that they need. The line in your question about losing Classroom assistants to higher paid jobs is almost identical to what I said to this committee previously.

We have been working with schools, over the last few months, using several co-production events to understand how the Teaching Assistance workforce can be supported, what the LA can do and how we can work in partnership with schools. This review will work alongside the new Government's direction in this space around TA support. This will continue to be a development area for the BCP Education system during the Autumn term.

One final point, we can all help by championing the role of TAs and encouraging people to consider this as a career.

Q2

At March's Committee meeting, I asked whether Council would publish monthly performance data for SEND services. I was told: "there is an established SEND Scorecard... this can be shared."

May's Cabinet meeting shared incomplete data for March, but no more. I asked whether Council would publish datasets for April and May, and share them here – including crucial data on refusals. I was told: "getting the data out... is really important" – and "[we] will commit to getting that data available".

Yet those datasets haven't been shared here. Nor has the refusals data.

I was also told this data "is available through the parent carers forum". Yet it hasn't released updates to full membership.

If Council agrees that "getting the data out... is really important", can it please explain, fully and clearly, exactly when and where it will publish monthly performance updates – including refusals data?

Answer from the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People:

We have been working with our Parent Carer Together organisation as to what measures parents and carers wish to see on a monthly basis. Last week they confirmed and agreed that the SEND Improvement Scorecard should be shared on the Local Offer each month. This is in the process of being uploaded to show June's data set.

Q3

In February's Full Council, members unanimously passed a motion to send three specific letters to government departments and the Local Government Association, in relation to Safety Valve.

For May's cabinet meeting, I asked how and when the Council will publish these letters. I was told that they: "will be published... in the June Council meeting".

That meeting was postponed, but no such letters have been published so far for July's Council meeting. Nor have they been shared here.

When and how will the Council publish the letters it was mandated to send during February's Full Council?

And can you confirm that those specific letters were sent on or after May 7th?

Answer from the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People:

The Chief Finance Officer, Adam Richens, wrote to Nico Hislop, Director Local Government Finance, at what was then the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on 22 May 2024.

This was copied to the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) to its then Chief Executive Rob Whiteman, the council's auditors Grant Thornton (Director Peter Barber), and the Local Government Association was also made aware via correspondence with its Chair (Shaun Davies). A copy of this letter was published as an appendix to the Medium Term Financial Plan update report to the 17 July Cabinet meeting. This can be accessed via the link below.

Appendix E - BCP Council Letter on HNB to DoF DLUHC 3.pdf

This letter has been followed by the Chief Finance Officer via meetings and e-mails with Ian Murray, Director of Public Finance Management at CIPFA seeking solutions.

Also in recent weeks, the Chief Executive, Graham Farrant, has been in e-mail correspondence and meetings with officers from the Department for Education (DfE) and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

Vicky Slade, previous Leader of the Council and since July 2024 MP for Mid Dorset and North Poole has also on this issue had conversations with and written formally to Bridget Phillipson, Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities. I can also send you a copy of this letter.

The following questions have been received from Rachel Filmer:

Q1

Since the Safety Valve deal was rejected by the Department for Education, we have substantially more information about the scheme and how it is affecting local authorities, families and schools. The charity IPSEA are calling for the scheme to be ceased, following an investigation that found numerous related unlawful policies. Five Norfolk academy trusts state that cuts to their top-up funding, apparently caused by failure to meet Safety Valve targets, will mean mass redundancies and exclusions of disabled children who cannot be educated or even kept safe. One third of Safety Valve areas report they still face insolvency.

Given this additional information, and that there is now evidence of agreements causing failures to meet statutory duties, are BCP still entertaining entering the scheme if given the opportunity, and what reassurances can you provide to schools and families who are rightfully concerned?

Answer from the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People:

BCP have not been given the opportunity to enter the Safety Valve Scheme so are not able consider entering the scheme or not.

Q2

Despite improvements in average timeliness of EHCPs, some local families have reported concerns that their legal rights are still not being fulfilled. Some have reported that they have not been given the statutory 15 days to respond to a draft plan. One reported receiving less than one hour to respond. Some plans are reportedly being finalised while BCP are still consulting with schools, with that process running down a parent's appeal window, leaving them with no legal ability to challenge any delay in naming a suitable placement.

In the last six months, what percentage of final plans were issued without a school named, and what percentage are finalised without parents being given the full statutory response period?

Answer from the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People:

We are committed to ensure that co-production happens and in a meaningful way, both with parents and with schools. Now that timeliness has been improved, we are working to 16 week deadlines for plans to allow for quality co-production of plans. We continue to work through our Quality Assurance processes to ensure that the plans are child centred and specific to their needs.

We are now working with all Case Officers to ensure that full co-production takes place in a timely fashion and that we ensure that this is meaningful. Any parent who wishes to discuss their plan should contact their Case Officer.

The following questions have been received from Pearl McCarthy

Q1

It is clear that more support for children with SEND in education is desperately needed and in recent times, BCP Council has struggled to keep up with requests from families for such support.

What proactive modelling is BCP Council doing to try to predict needs in future months and years so we are not finding ourselves in perpetual crisis in this area?

Answer from the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People:

I agree that more support is needed for children with SEND and there is a struggle to keep up with the request of families. This is a national issue and many, if not most, local authorities are in a similar position.

Within BCP we are working on a new SEND Sufficiency Strategy, and this has been created through workshops with Parent Carers Together & Parent Carers Foundation as well as schools. This aligns to our Joint Strategic needs assessment planning processes. Monthly processes are now in place to understand the volume and requirement of future plans and what this means for ongoing need across the BCP area.

9. SEND Progress Update re SEND Improvement Plan and Safety Valve

The Interim 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 'A' to these Minutes in the Minute Book.

This report provided an overview of the work to date within the Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) system, through the newly developed SEND Improvement plan. It provided a narrative to the improvement work to date within the BCP Council SEND service, the wider SEND system and points towards the significant progress that had been made over the last 6 months. It is recognised though, that much more needs to be done and that a continued effort is needed across the partnership to address the further areas of improvement.

Alongside the operational and strategic improvement work within the SEND system, the report also provided information and a short narrative on the progress of the Safety Valve programme and resultant next steps. Discussions were still ongoing with the Department for Education (DfE) and Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and as such a revised Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) plan had not yet commenced.

The report also outlined the serious implications of the current funding position for SEND services, for the Council.

The Committee discussed the report including:

- In response to a query raised, regarding SEND services working to Safety Valve objectives, the Committee was advised that there were no further conversations between BCP and the DfE regarding Safety Valve. The management of the designated school grants had to continue, and the service was still working to that plan. Children's Services officers would welcome an opportunity to speak with the local MP to discuss BCP as well as the national challenges that the service faces.
- In response to a query raised regarding the two-tier system for new and old cases, the Committee was informed that there were 232 children awaiting assessment due to a backlog. This had resulted in

new cases being processed much faster than the backlogged cases. However, the issue had been resolved, and all cases will now be decided within six weeks.

- The Committee was advised that work was being done to increase the support and investment in parent carer groups to encourage greater community-based discussion linking groups across BCP. Locality events were being organised to share the plans of Children's Services and to ensure residents had an opportunity to contribute and develop ideas.
- In response to a query raised regarding parent complaints, the Committee was advised that complaints are considered and responded to weekly, taking into account the status of any highlighted issues. Children's Services prioritises addressing all issues as part of the SEND improvement plan and the new structure.
- The Committee was advised that the link to the SEND scorecard would be shared in these Minutes in the Minute Book, a link to which would follow: [SEND Improvement Board key performance indicator \(bcpCouncil.gov.uk\)](https://bcpCouncil.gov.uk/SEND-Improvement-Board-key-performance-indicator).
- In response to a query raised regarding Dingley's Promise, the Committee was advised that Dingley's Promise is a charity that the services were working with to support the early years cohort of children with emerging SEND needs. The aim was to work with and support families on how they can access early years education.
- In response to a query raised regarding the responsibility of providing an inclusive system in the mainstream setting, the Committee was advised that support was being provided to schools to promote inclusivity. This includes identifying challenges that schools may face in becoming more inclusive so that tailored support can be offered. The aim was to address these challenges and promote inclusivity throughout all year groups.
- In response to a query raised regarding support for young carers, the Committee was advised that there was a team in place to support young carers throughout education, as well as support for schools on how to best assist young carers with any challenges they may have.
- The Committee was advised that more work can be shared with the Committee in a future meeting relating to young carers, inclusivity and the Early Help offer. **ACTION**
- In response to the query raised regarding the Interim Director of Education and Skills contract ending and its impact on the improvement journey, Children's Services officers commended the work done by the Interim Director. The directorate had identified the direction of travel and challenges through diagnostic measures and now has a blueprint for the improvement journey to ensure the improvement work continues.
- In response to a query raised regarding the additional funding received for educational psychologists, the Committee was advised that the funding was granted to address the backlog of assessments that were due. Additionally, it was used to establish better service provision and processes, with additional resources provided to increase capacity if required through locum agencies.

- The Committee was advised that a SEND restructure had been implemented to tackle the reliance on agency staff. As a part of this restructuring, an assistant case officer role was introduced to facilitate internal progression within the organisation and to provide training for new case officers.
- In response to a query raised regarding teaching assistants and addressing the gap in funding for them within schools, the Committee was advised that discussions were being held with headteachers to determine the best way to support the development of teaching assistants within schools. A commitment was made to recognise this as an issue, and discussions are scheduled to take place in September to address this issue.

RESOLVED that the Committee note the report.

Voting: Unanimous

10. Child Exploitation Working Group Findings Report

The Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People and Skills 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.

Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 7 June 2022 received an update on Child Exploitation and following consideration of the information received resolved to commission a Child Exploitation Working Group to consider all areas of child exploitation to include county lines and knife crime. This report provides the findings of the working group.

The Committee discussed the report including:

- The Committee highlighted the importance of addressing knife crime as a priority and the importance of the work done in the working group to continue.
- The Committee discussed the importance of experienced youth workers in tackling child exploitation and highlighted the ongoing complexities around that.
- The Committee discussed the possibility of creating a new working group that includes young people and that would give young people an opportunity to have a voice in this matter. Additionally, the Committee proposed training sessions for councillors, led by youth representatives to share their insights.
- The Committee highlighted and discussed the importance of community engagement to help combat this issue.

RESOLVED that the Committee:

(a) Note the findings of the Working Group

(b) Continue to monitor this important issue regularly with a view to considering a further working group on this item.

RESOLVED that the Committee RECOMMEND to Cabinet:

(c) That partnership working be promoted to ensure increased communication around the issues highlighted with parents, schools, children and youth services.

(d) That earlier age appropriate education be implemented within schools across BCP regarding the risks associated with exploitation, drugs and the dangers of carrying weapons.

Voting: Unanimous

11. Items for information

The following items were circulated for information only with no presentation or discussion planned:

- Virtual School Headteacher Annual Report 22/23
- Education Improvement Report
- Children's Safeguarding Partnership Review
- Youth Justice Plan 2024/2025

The Chair advised the Committee that should they have any comments or queries regarding those reports, then please email them to the Chair for action.

A Committee member raised a query about the virtual school and reporting frequency. It was listed as an annual report in the workplan. The councillor suggested that this should report back more frequently.

12. Portfolio Holder Update

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

- The Portfolio Holder chaired the Corporate Parenting Board and discussed plans to make it more accessible to young people.
- Attended a meeting with Parent Carers Together
- Participated in an informational meeting on upcoming inspections.
- Attended the South West Lead Members network meeting to address concerns regarding Safety Valve and the high needs block deficit.
- Acknowledged the Parkfield School closure and extended gratitude to BCP officers and assisting schools for their support.
- Participated in the Early Help Partnership launch event, which was well-attended with over 100 participants. [Early Help Partnership – Our Dorset](#)

13. Forward Plan

The Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committee was asked to consider and identify work priorities for publication in a Forward Plan.

A Committee Member highlighted the requests made during the meeting for potential scrutiny topics and the Committee was advised of the process for them to be progressed.

It was agreed that the following items would be brought to future meetings and considered in the future work programming session:

- The local, regional and national work of Members of Youth Parliament and their activities.
- Information on the cost of agency workers
- Inclusion strategy
- Review of alternative provision

The Committee considered the scrutiny request from Cllr O Brown on the Family Hubs across BCP and agreed that this be added to the Children's Service Overview and Scrutiny Committee forward plan.

The meeting ended at 8.19 pm

CHAIR