

BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET

CHILDREN, ADULTS, HEALTH AND WELLBEING POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Monday, 16th December, 2024

Present:-

Councillors: Dine Romero (Chair), Liz Hardman (Vice-Chair), Paul Crossley, David Harding, Ruth Malloy, Lesley Mansell, Joanna Wright and Onkar Saini

Co-opted Members (non-voting): Chris Batten and Kevin Burnett

Cabinet Member for Children's Services: Councillor Paul May

Also in attendance: Mary Kearney-Knowles (Director of Children and Education), Christopher Wilford (Director of Education & Safeguarding), Laura Ambler (Place Director, B&NES, BSW ICB), Laura Donnelly (Head of SEND) and Sarah Hogan (Head of Service for Children's Quality Assurance and Safeguarding)

58 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

59 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chair drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

60 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

The Panel received apologies from Councillor Pankhania.

61 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Kevin Burnett declared an other interest with regard to Agenda item 9 (B&NES, Swindon & Wiltshire Integrated Care Board Update) as a family member works for Off The Record.

62 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN

The Chair announced that having consulted with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, the Panel would begin to think about their "policy development role" in the New Year. She said that the initial suggestion is to try exploring the national, regional and local issues regarding "Early Help", with the aim of presenting a policy research paper with recommendations related to a future policy.

She added that, if agreed, a Working Group from the Panel would be formed, a terms of reference written and resources established to assist with this role.

63 ITEMS FROM THE PUBLIC OR COUNCILLORS - TO RECEIVE STATEMENTS, PETITIONS OR QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE BUSINESS OF THIS MEETING

Richard Franklin addressed the Panel and made a statement regarding Newton House.

He said that without the short breaks / respite care at Newton House his son and other service users would have to go into full time residential care which would result in much higher costs.

He stated that trust is a huge factor when handing over a family member into the care of somebody else and that this had initially taken a number months to establish. He said that now, when his son attends Newton House, the team very rarely need to contact us as they know his needs, medical and personal, so well. He added that this therefore allows him and his wife to relax.

He explained that his son enjoys the time away from home and that the staff take great care of him.

He said that the service provided is a total lifeline for us as a family and the thought of it being removed has already caused stress, anxiety and worry.

He informed the Panel that no other providers have been put in place.

He thanked everyone that had offered their support to him and his family since the announcement had been made.

Councillor Liz Hardman asked how much notice he had been given that the service was to cease.

Richard Franklin replied that he had received the letter around two weeks ago which stated that no further placements would be allowed from February 1st 2025.

The Chair asked if he was aware that the decision had been paused.

Richard Franklin replied that he was aware, but said that the concern remains as to what will happen in February.

The Chair said that Councillor Alison Born, Cabinet Member for Adult Services has been invited to address the Panel on this issue at their January meeting. She thanked Richard Franklin for attending on behalf of the Panel.

Councillor Eleanor Jackson addressed the Panel on the subject of the Select Advisory Council for Religious Education - Agreed Syllabus Revision. A summary of her statement is set out below.

'In 2021 at the same stage in negotiations for funding for revision of the syllabus I said, 'The values, beliefs and visions which should undergird our conduct as Councillors, and in our personal lives, have to be learnt and communicated, and the new RE syllabus is crucial for doing this.'

It may surprise you to learn that the present syllabus, Awareness, Mystery, Value is highly rated and adopted by other authorities, and that a number of our schools have won WIRE awards.

But excellence does not happen by accident. Not only is a good, up to date syllabus needed, with plenty of scope for adventure and creativity, but teachers need support and training, as SACRE hopes to provide.

B&NES SACRE needs to have a new Agreed Syllabus ready to be used by schools in September 2027.

Given the current national RE landscape we will need to rethink and update our current Agreed Syllabus. This will be very different from when the Agreed Syllabus was reviewed in 2020-22, and adopted by Council in September 2022. The new approach might be crudely described as 'grassroots up', focussing on ordinary believers' philosophy, meditation and worship.

The strength of the legislation, going back to the 1944 Education Act, is the requirement that what is taught reflects *local* communities.

To achieve this change of approach we need to consult widely in the profession and the faith communities, this takes time and costs money.

This process needs to start now and be spread across a number of financial years. Hence the need for funding to be planned carefully and drawn in stages from the LA's most appropriate (CSSB) funding.

B&NES SACRE therefore will do what it can to seek what funding is available from other organisations such as educational trusts, and to achieve economies of scale by working together with other SACREs.

The financial year 2025 - 26 will include initial research, teacher surveys and recommendations.

I would request this Panel to recommend to the Cabinet that the SACRE funding (£8,421.05) for constructing a new Agreed Syllabus and related training be accepted.

Kevin Burnett commented that the SACRE Advisor for B&NES has worked on the assumption that the new agreed syllabus has to be in place by September 2027, so we are working in this coming financial year (2025/26) with teachers and people on the ground to try and start the process of gathering views and how the syllabus would work in practice.

He added that they are trying to work with other SACREs in a sort of a regional hub and have got three or four on board already.

The Chair asked the officers present if this request is part of the budget proposals for 2025/26.

The Director for Education & Safeguarding replied that it was not because it is funded out of the Central Services budget of the Dedicated Schools Grant so the request for the funding can go to him in order to make a decision.

Councillor Ruth Malloy asked if £8,421 was being asked for in this financial year, how much would be asked for in year two or three.

Kevin Burnett replied that they were not sure at this stage but were hopeful that any future requests would be much reduced because the other SACREs would buy into the work.

The Chair thanked Councillor Jackson for her statement on behalf of the Panel.

64 MINUTES: 11TH NOVEMBER 2024

Councillor Lesley Mansell referred to the matter of Social Prescribing and asked if the Panel could also be shown the framework, mentioned by Kate Morton, when it is presented to the Health & Wellbeing Board, possibly in February 2025.

She also asked how the Council is enabling those that are eligible to access the Household Support Grant.

Councillor Mansell asked whether HCRG Care Group has produced an equality impact assessment (EQIA) regarding the Integrated Community-based Care contract that had been recently awarded to HCRG Care Group. She added that if one has, can it be shared with the Panel.

The Panel confirmed the minutes of the previous meeting, with these comments in mind, as a true record and they were duly signed by the Chair.

65 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

Councillor Paul May, Cabinet Member for Children's Services addressed the Panel, a copy of the update will be attached as an online appendix to these minutes, a summary is set out below.

Policy Development

He said that he supported the idea of forming a Working Group from the Panel to explore the national, regional and local issues regarding "Early Help" with the aim of presenting a policy research paper with recommendations to a future meeting.

He added that any work relating to this project will require a terms of reference and resources, from within existing budgets, to assist the Panel in this role.

Ofsted

The Local Authority received notification on November 27th 2024 that they would have an ILACS Focused Visit on Care Leavers on 4/5th December. Officers met all the submission requirements ahead of Inspectors being on site in the Civic Centre December 4th and 5th 2024. I am pleased to say that I had an hour interview with the Lead Inspector as Lead Member on 2/12/2024. I attended the welcome and presentation on 4/12/2024 and the feedback session on December 5th 2024. The report will be available in January 2025 and I will share once received.

HMIP

I updated at the last CAHW that the Youth Justice Service were notified of their inspection. Council officers and partners contributed to the on-site visit of the inspection team. I attended the feedback session and heard some positive feedback. A full report will be available in February 2025 and I will share with the Panel.

With regards to both inspections, I would ask the Panel to register their formal thanks and well done for staff, managers and administrators for their dedicated commitment for these inspections. Both sets of inspectors fed back that we were so well organised and so open and helpful to their teams.

I expect in due course to provide the feedback reports and any action plans back to the Panel.

The Chair said that she echoed his comments on behalf of the Panel.

Councillor Liz Hardman referred to the subject of Free School Meals Auto Enrolment and asked who would be informing the schools of this change.

Councillor May replied that the SEND / AP Advice Service would be used to inform schools about this proposal.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding added that he had already taken steps to inform the Chief Executive Officers and Academy Heads that this work is underway. He said that this was a positive step to take and that further communications regarding it were due to take place later in the week.

Councillor Paul Crossley commented that he was pleased with the success shown by the West of England Music and Arts (WEMA). He asked if within a future update the areas of Keynsham and the Chew Valley could be addressed. He also asked if the project had any future goals / aspirations.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding replied that they are looking to build on the success that has already been achieved and are keen to engage further. He said he would ask if any further information could be supplied and that he knew that Simon Lock, Manager (WEMA) was willing to attend a future meeting if necessary.

Councillor Crossley asked what work the Council does with its Young People to help them when exiting the Youth Justice Service.

Councillor May said that having met the team as part of the inspection it was clear that the future of the children is a priority and that we have a responsibility to look after them whilst in custody and after their sentence has concluded.

The Director of Children's Services & Education added that there are a range of services available within B&NES, one of them being Compass which is our preventative service that works with young people aged 8 – 17 years of age who may be at risk of becoming involved in offending behaviour.

She added that every child that is in custody will have an allocated Case Officer and receive support from Children's Social Care.

She said that the work of the Violence Reduction Partnership has also continued and there is evidence to show that mentoring from lived experience has been really helpful.

Councillor Crossley asked how many young people from B&NES were currently in custody and from that number how many were a Looked After Child.

The Director of Children's Services & Education replied that the numbers within B&NES are small and said that two young people have been detained in custody within the past year and that one of them was a Looked After Child.

The Chair commented that she would appreciate it if the Panel could receive the next Youth Justice Plan prior to it being submitted to Council.

The Director of Children's Services & Education replied that this had been a two-year plan and offered to bring an update to the Panel at a future meeting.

Kevin Burnett asked how parents were to be involved / informed about the Free School Meals Auto Enrolment. He also asked whether the money involved would go directly into the school's budget.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding replied that the Welfare Team are following a toolkit and said that parents will still have an option to opt out of receiving this service. He said that the money received would go directly to the school.

Kevin Burnett asked about the long-term funding of the Music Service, whether the MATs within B&NES all buy-in to the service and whether that is required for it to remain a success.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding replied that funding for three years was agreed with the Arts Council in April 2023. He added that they are a not-for-profit charity and work in partnership with all the local Trusts.

Kevin Burnett referred to the subject of HERS and asked if the categories of support for children could be given.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding replied that this information can be shared with the Panel.

Kevin Burnett asked if the Community Services contracts within Children's Services have been reviewed alongside those within Adult Social Care.

Councillor May replied that the Council was forecast to overspend by £5.5m this year, but felt it was important to state that this would not see them dropping their standards of support for our young people.

He added that he was discussing this matter with the Public Health team to mitigate any effect this may have on the services provided. He said that where possible there should not be any cuts to Early Help as if this were to affect long term costs it would not be sensible.

Councillor Lesley Mansell asked how the Panel's Knife Crime Sub-Group links to the work of the Violence Reduction Partnership.

She commented that she would welcome further data on the Music Service at a future meeting alongside what benefits this provides to our young people.

She asked for assurances to be given that the Council was meeting its legal requirements with regard to safeguarding in respect of Home Education and HERS.

She also asked how many young people who were accessing HERS have a mental health diagnosis.

Councillor May thanked her for her questions and asked if she could email them to him to enable responses to be given.

The Director of Children's Services & Education added that colleagues across Children's Services have been involved with the work of Panel's Sub-Group. She added that work to attempt to keep young people out of custody is carried out across the service and with schools and families. She added that they attempt to provide as much support as possible in relation to this matter.

Councillor May said that in terms of Youth Justice they were awaiting the outcome of the Inspection report and that if any actions are required, as a result of that, they would be reported back to the Panel.

He added that it was important to look at our Home Education arrangements and that a complete review has been carried out to make sure there is no child at risk within B&NES. He added that he was checking with the Director of Children's Services & Education on a regular basis to make sure that this is done effectively.

Councillor Ruth Malloy asked whether the advisory annual teachers visits to elected home educated families was frequent enough and said she would welcome a fuller report on Home Education to the Panel.

She said that she would also welcome more information on the HERS as she found it very interesting that of the figures presented there are approximately double as many girls as boys accessing the service and that for a lot of the cases that it is because of mental health issues.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding replied that the numbers relating to Home Education have increased and that a report could be submitted to the Panel in due course which could also look at alternative provision.

He added that he would like to reassure the Panel that the annual visit is based on a RAG rating system and that depending on that rating it will determine the level of visiting.

He said that they also work with a School Nurse to make sure that we can look at any health needs that might be required around those families.

Councillor Joanna Wright questioned whether there was enough policy in place to protect children and asked if the Panel should make sure that more is created, even at a local level or by challenging the Government to introduce more at a national level. She suggested that more detail on his policy proposal be discussed with the Panel in two months' time.

She informed the Panel that B&NES has been awarded a Tree of Hope from the Sycamore Gap tree for Looked After Young Children and that it will hopefully be planted next Winter in Alice Park.

She also asked what further work was taking place in relation to School Streets

Councillor May replied that the Tree of Hope was a positive sign of our commitment to the young people who've come into our care.

He added that he believed there had been a commitment from Councillor Wait to attend a future Panel meeting and provide an update on School Streets.

Councillor David Harding asked what happens when a child's parents take the decision to home educate but they then don't engage with the Council and its services.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding replied that if we are not satisfied with any arrangements made for a child's education we can issue a School Attendance Order which is a legal notice which allows the Local Authority to place the child on the role of a school and then it would be the legal responsibility of the parents to make sure that the child attends the school.

Councillor Harding asked how many children in B&NES have one of those in place.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding replied that he would have to check on those figures and would supply the number for the last academic year and the academic year to date.

Councillor Liz Hardman informed the Panel that a White Paper had been published by the Government and that they are looking at home educated children, but she added that she thought that the Council should consider having its own policy.

She also asked how many of our home educated young people are known to Social Services or were in receipt of free school meals.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding replied that we don't have this information as far as he knew. He added that he felt that they should also look at how many of these young people have Special Educational Needs and are on Educational Health & Care Plans.

Councillor Hardman asked what the procedure was if on the annual visit to a child who is being home educated you find that education is not sufficient.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding replied that Elective Home Education, the service and what it delivers sits under the Head of the Virtual School.

He added that B&NES has its own guidance on this issue and is clear about what we do and what we don't do. He said that he felt that if a policy were to be written it would benefit from being supported nationally.

He said that they can provide the numbers to the Panel of the children with EHCPs who are being home educated because this sits under the Virtual School. He added that we make sure that all the children, especially if they have an EHCP receive the additional support, such as speech and language, even though they have decided upon home education. He said there was quite a lot of information that they could bring in in a further paper.

Councillor Hardman referred to HERS and asked what the absentee rate was for these students, why are the majority of children from key stages three and four and what percentage of HERS children are receiving the service due to mental health issues.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding replied that he did not have all of this information to hand. He said that in relation to the oversight of their absenteeism that HERS is run by the RUH Partnership Trust and is currently based on the second floor of the Abbot Alphege School.

With regard to the issue of mental health he said that it would be his assumption that there was probably an older population of young people within CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) and therefore that is reflected in the HERS numbers.

Councillor May said it was important to recognize the responsibility that our Social Workers have with regard to children becoming home educated. He added that it was great that the Council has the Director of Children's Services & Education in her role as she takes this responsibility really seriously.

The Chair asked if the number of young people who are being seen by CAMHS are older because of the difficulties in the time it takes to actually get the support required.

She also said that it would be helpful to know about the children that disappear from any list once they are removed from school as they are likely to be the children that will be most at risk.

Laura Ambler, BSW ICB replied that it was complex in terms of access for CAMHS where children and young people need a clinical diagnosis to be able to access the service. She said that she believed that there is some capacity within the service so it might be something that we can back to another meeting.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding added that the Local Authority has a responsibility for the tracking of children missing any education and that when a school is notified that a parent wishes for them to leave or has left they pass that information onto the Council. He said that they use a variety of information sources to try and obtain where they have gone and that all local authorities should be doing the same.

He explained that if they have children that have left school without notifying us then we have to go through a formal tracking process. He said that that schools within B&NES were generally very good at telling us when someone does leave.

The Chair, on behalf of the Panel, thanked the Cabinet Member for his update.

66 B&NES, SWINDON & WILTSHIRE INTEGRATED CARE BOARD (BSW ICB) UPDATE

Laura Ambler, Director of Place for Bath and North East Somerset, BSW ICB addressed the Panel and highlighted the following areas from within the update.

Sulis Elective Orthopaedic Centre

Sulis Hospital is a partner of the Royal United Hospital Bath. The hospital is currently building the Sulis Elective Orthopaedic Centre (SEOC) on its site just outside of Bath, and it is now entering the final build stages with the team now readying the new wing for a December launch.

The new SEOC wing will create capacity for 3,750 non-emergency, orthopaedic operations for NHS patients across Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire, as well as the wider South West region each year, allowing people to have the surgery they need. NHS patients will see reduced waiting times and waiting lists with increased capacity to offset delays.

A new travel initiative will encourage healthy and sustainable travel habits that benefit everyone. The initiative includes making e-bikes available to all staff for long-term hire, with charging available at Sulis Hospital. There will also be charging points

for electric vehicles, a comprehensive overview of bus travel, including WESTlink bus routes, and an extension of the Sulis Hospital car sharing scheme.

The SEOC is also bringing around 100 new jobs to the area, both clinical and non-clinical. This recruitment is in progress and going well. Following a successful open day in July, which attracted more than 110 visitors, Sulis received approximately 700 expressions of interest for all role types. Throughout November and December, Sulis will be inducting more 30 new starters.

Vaccinations

Since the launch of this winter's campaign to protect people against flu, Covid-19 and Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV), more than 450,000 vaccinations have been delivered to eligible people living locally.

Covid-19 jabs were rolled out to those eligible on 3 October, while flu jabs have been available for pregnant women and children aged between two and three- years-old since 1 September.

In BSW, vaccinations have been delivered in walk-in clinics, GP surgeries, pharmacies and community settings, with the initial phase focussing on reaching those unable to leave their home without assistance, such as housebound patients and care home staff and residents.

Pharmacy provision in Bath and North East Somerset

Data from the most recent Community Pharmacy Workforce Survey is now available and provides a snapshot of staffing inside community pharmacies as of autumn 2023.

As it stands, this data is currently the only source of metrics on the community pharmacy workforce. The ICB is in the process of analysing the data, while simultaneously reviewing the impacts of local initiatives to tackle the workforce challenges that have been seen in the region.

Some of the initial results are:

- The number of full-time equivalent pharmacists in BSW has increased from 212 in 2022 to 222 in 2023
- The ICB has increased the number of trainee pharmacists from six in 2022 to 20 in 2023
- The pharmacist vacancy rate in BSW has fallen from 28 per cent in 2022 to 22 per cent in 2023
- The number of independent prescribers within pharmacies has increased from 19 in 2022 to 28 in 2023.

New initiatives to support children and young people

The ICB uses the national CYPCore20PLUS5 framework to underpin all work carried out to support children and young people, with progress measured against the following five clinical areas:

- Children and young people's mental health
- Asthma
- Epilepsy
- Oral health
- Diabetes

Recently, as part of ongoing efforts to increase focus on mental health, the ICB has launched the BSW Youth Worker Pilot, which involves having a dedicated youth worker in each of the region's acute hospital emergency department, including the Royal United Hospital in Bath. This is provided by our third sector partners and the service in B&NES is provided by Off the Record.

The ICB has launched an epilepsy specialist nurse pilot at the Royal United Hospital in Bath, which offers additional care for any young people admitted as a result of their epilepsy. The new role also has links into the community, which helps to offer improved clinical outcomes and enables staff to embed new ways of working across Bath and North East Somerset.

To improve diabetes outcomes, the ICB has focused on prevention of obesity by expanding its local complications for excessive weight (CEW) clinics. In addition, teams are working to adopt the latest guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) around managing blood glucose levels in patients with type 1 diabetes, with an emphasis on ensuring children and young people are prioritised.

Councillor Liz Hardman referred to a point raised at a previous meeting relating to a maternity trauma project that had been set up and had asked for any information regarding the waiting list for it of four to six months.

Laura Ambler replied that she has asked for clarification on that matter and would update when she had received a response.

Councillor Hardman commented that it was good to see that the figures in relation to pharmacies were going up slightly, but said she wondered if more were needed. She also believed that some pharmacies were opting out of the NHS scheme and asked if more information was available.

Laura Ambler replied that she would enquire as to whether there was any further information that could be shared.

Councillor Hardman said that the Youth Worker Pilot scheme sounds excellent but asked for some figures on this and what were the hoped for potential outcomes.

Laura Ambler replied that although this work had not been fully evaluated yet, they were already seeing a positive impact.

Councillor Hardman referred to the subject of vaccinations and explained that some residents have said that when schools have had information about a vaccination for their children that schools aren't always informing parents where there is local provision. She said that a resident had received the child's eligibility notice but no information about the local places to get them.

Laura Ambler replied that she was not aware of this issue and would welcome any further details regarding it.

Kevin Burnett asked whether the ICB has been able to maximise the number of vaccinations given during this recent period.

Laura Ambler replied that in terms of the vaccinations they do feel that they have what they need to maximize uptake and that the benchmark data shows that they do very well in terms of getting vaccinations out there to those that need them.

Kevin Burnett asked what the pharmacists were telling the ICB about how they are coping with new demands placed upon them and whether the ICB is content with the pharmacy provision and if they have any particular concerns with any of the 100 hour pharmacies reducing their opening hours.

Laura Ambler replied with regard to pharmacies that they have no immediate concerns around the contracted hours at this moment in time and that there is an ongoing review so an update could be provided in due course.

Kevin Burnett asked if the new initiatives that have been described are being delivered because of new money or was it from existing resources. He also asked if CAMHS would be able to cope with the extra referrals or were things being prevented from getting to CAMHS because of these interventions.

Laura Ambler replied that the funding was from within existing transformation resources, and it is a pilot for a period of time, focusing on prevention. She added that they are seeing good initial outcomes and that it is reducing the admissions to our emergency departments in particular, and also supporting those who are in a hospital setting either through mental health or because they have got a long-term condition.

She said that when we talk about children young people with emotional health and well-being needs it is about meeting the need that is being presented and in some instances there may be a clinical diagnosis which means that that child or young person is appropriate for a referral through to CAMHS, but in other instances it may be another type of early support.

Councillor Joanna Wright referred to Asthma Friendly Schools and said that it was interesting that the whole emphasis is put on the school and the young person. She commented that in her opinion it goes back to the matter of School Streets and that

essentially there is an air quality issue and it was a question of how do we support that and not get siloed.

She asked if there was a need for a greater conversation to be had across this piece of work that brings the issues together and whether School Streets was also Public Health issue about children getting to school safely and then when they are at school that those spaces have clean air.

Laura Ambler replied that she would discuss the issue with colleagues to make sure this is a joint initiative with the Local Authority.

Councillor David Harding commented that he believed that last year and the year before around only half of children who were eligible for school flu vaccines (Years 7 – 11) received them and asked how the vaccination programme was going this year and were any actions being taken improve it.

Laura Ambler replied that she would need to check the data on this matter, but said she was not aware that the figures were as low as that.

Councillor Harding asked if data could also be provided on the adult covid vaccination rates, how many people are eligible and actually taking it up.

Laura Ambler replied that this information could be shared with the Panel.

Councillor Lesley Mansell asked in any information could be provided to the Panel with regard to measles vaccinations.

Laura Ambler replied that further vaccination information could be provided to the Panel within a future update report.

Councillor Mansell referred to Community Pharmacies and asked if there were any concerns regarding local accessibility.

Laura Ambler replied that they were not aware of any initially but would welcome any feedback from the Panel.

Councillor Mansell asked if the figures in relation to physiotherapy were average waiting times.

Laura Ambler replied that they were.

The Chair, on behalf of the Panel, thanked Laura Ambler for her report.

67 INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER (IRO) ANNUAL REPORT

The Head of Service for Children's Quality Assurance and Safeguarding began by acknowledging that there had been some real challenges within the service between 2023 and 2024.

She said that she was really passionate about our children in care and making sure that they have a really good quality IRO service and that they are able to build really safe and secure relationships with their IRO.

She wished to acknowledge that during this period there was the sudden death of one of our children in care who was 17, approaching 18 years old. She added that there was a Child Safeguarding Practice Review report done as a result of the child's death.

She stated that there were two key, core areas for the IRO service to think about and that was about how we escalate and challenge some of our colleagues across Health, Education and Children's Social Care when an Independent Reviewing Officer isn't satisfied that the areas of a child's care planning is progressing adequately that they are following a robust escalation process.

She explained that within the report there is reference to a Dispute Resolution Protocol which was a recommendation of the IRO handbook which has not been updated since 2010 and that she thought many IRO managers and the IRO themselves would advocate that that does need to be looked at in more detail and revised.

She said that there was a real challenge in the IRO service because your remit is to ensure that care planning for children in care is progressing, but equally you have to take on board some of the challenges that we may face within services. She added that nationally they were seeing significant changes in terms of being able to access services from the Social Work practice.

She said that one of the areas that they have reflected upon as a service is what are the barriers to IROs in making formal escalations and challenges and then trying to find that balance around working with colleagues in a respectful and courteous way whilst also championing for our children in care and what they need.

She stated that they had relaunched the Dispute Resolution Protocol in September to be able to generate a greater sense of what the themes and challenges were for our children in care that IROs were identifying. She added that they were then looking with colleagues within Children's Social Care about how we can take some of those themes forward, learn from them and have strengthened our reporting and how we collect that data.

She informed the Panel that there were 359 Children in the service at the end of 2023 / 2024 which was quite a significant number of children for a service that has only 6.4 full-time equivalent members of staff. She said that children can be placed locally within B&NES, but could also live in other areas of the country, such as London and Birmingham for example.

She explained that this presents a significant challenge as a small Local Authority and that when there is any disruption in service delivery it is difficult as they do not have any kind of flex in the system to step in and cover. She added that sadly for some children in this reporting period they did not have their Child in Care Review within the time frame that we ideally would want them to.

She stated though that the IROs do know their children incredibly well and was impressed by how they could bring to life the children they work with and were able to tell me with real confidence that these were the children that I need to know about as Head of Service.

She acknowledged that there are areas within the report that they need to improve upon and that the Child in Care Review timing was not in line with what the Panel would have seen from previous reports. She gave them some assurances as in Quarter 1 of this financial year those figures were up to 92% and then 98% for Quarter 2.

She said that they have begun to think about how they can support children to claim their Child in Care Reviews and take more of a lead and ownership to realize that they are their meetings, to try and take that formal lens off it for them and to get greater participation.

She said that a working group had been implemented from July and they were looking to explore the various means in which we can obtain feedback - the use of QR codes, speaking to young people via telephone calls across the service and a mystery shopper which has been successful in some other areas. She added that she hoped that this would give some feedback around actually what our children in care, their carers and families are saying about the IRO service and capture the significant difference that an IRO can make for a child in care.

Councillor Liz Hardman commented on the figure of 29% of Children in Care Reviews completed within the statutory time of 20 working days and said that this was particularly low. She acknowledged though that there had been a huge amount of staff sickness which obviously had a big impact on capacity.

She asked for clarification regarding the Dispute Resolution Protocol and who is the dispute between, is it between what a Social Worker is saying about the child and what the IRO officer is saying or is it between an officer and the parents / carers.

The Head of Service for Children's Quality Assurance and Safeguarding replied that a review can take place in three stages, it is important that they are carried out and that many are completed by day 20. She added that she hoped that the improvements mentioned earlier would continue to be seen in the coming year.

She explained that the Dispute Resolution Protocol was a process to discuss any differences of opinion or views. She gave an example of where you might have a sibling group who are unfortunately not able to reside with their family and also because of the size of that sibling group they may have to be placed with different

carers. She said that when looking at the care plan and considering what is being proposed in terms of where those children live longer term, how they see one another, how does their relationship get promoted, the IRO may talk to a Social Worker and if they're not in agreement then they will access the Dispute Resolution Protocol and escalate up to the Line Manager, the Team Manager, the Head of Service, the Assistant Director and then the Director of Children's Services (DCS), so there are five stages to the process.

She added that in her six years in this role she believed that only one had ever gone to DCS level because they have always managed to resolve for the best outcomes of the children.

Councillor Onkar Saini asked how the revised Dispute Resolution Protocol was being monitored for effectiveness and what improvements have been observed since its implementation.

The Head of Service for Children's Quality Assurance and Safeguarding replied that the Protocol was launched on the 27th of September and so they were really in the early days and months of its work. She added that this was something they would be monitoring and would be able to get a greater sense of how successful it has been by the end of next year, in terms of its impact on the outcome for children and could bring that back or feedback to Councillor May or the Director of Children's Services.

Councillor Saini asked what current mechanisms are in place to gather feedback from children, families and carers about the IRO service and how is this being used to drive improvements.

The Head of Service for Children's Quality Assurance and Safeguarding replied that they do not have a formal process in place and that over the years they have written to children individually to seek their feedback, sent a consultation form after every Child in Care Review to get their feedback and they have also done the same to carers and families, even providing a self-addressed envelope. She added that in one year they received about 17 responses from over 500 Child in Care Reviews and so this was not overly representative.

She said they were aiming to provide a platform which is accessible and much more readily available for when someone might want to give feedback, and that one idea is to include a QR code that might take them to a short questionnaire that goes out on invites or review records so they can provide feedback about the IRO service or other services working with children.

Councillor Saini asked what measures are being taken to ensure the IRO service maintain a full complement of staff to avoid disruption and what steps are being implemented to improve the timeliness of Children in Care Reviews and ensure they are held within statutory timeframes.

The Head of Service for Children's Quality Assurance and Safeguarding replied that there is a commitment to the IRO service in B&NES in terms of absences and specifically if we have any anticipated a longer-term absence there would be a much earlier identification of interim measures and that we would look to either recruit

agency IROs or locum. She added that they would also consider some fixed term contracts if required. She said that they were able to secure some additional funding for a post to provide extra capacity, but this would not continue into the next financial year. She explained that she does work closely with the Director of Education & Safeguarding and the Director of Children's Services to talk about any potential challenges.

Councillor David Harding referred to the number of Children in Care that are placed outside of the Local Authority area (57%) and asked what is being done to reduce this.

The Head of Service for Children's Quality Assurance and Safeguarding replied that this was a national challenge and that there is lots of work being done to recruit Foster Carers within B&NES. She added that quite a few of the unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people when they first arrive in the UK are placed for example by Kent and they might place them in London and then they don't want to come to B&NES. She added that work was done last year, and we saw a number of our unaccompanied young people returning closer to the local area, in Bristol, and this way they can begin to feel connected to B&NES and relationships are easier to build and navigate.

Councillor Harding asked if she was optimistic that this strategy was going to work.

The Head of Service for Children's Quality Assurance and Safeguarding replied that she felt that central Government needs to offer some support to Local authorities to address this issue. She added that we are asking people to care for some of our most vulnerable children and they need to do that with systems around them. She said she was hopeful rather than optimistic.

Kevin Burnett referred to staff absenteeism and whether that might be a flag for anything else, in terms of pressure within the service.

The Head of Service for Children's Quality Assurance and Safeguarding replied that staff absenteeism was not related to work related stress it was personal issues that could not have been anticipated. She added that IROs have significant amounts of management access, they can contact me whenever and they have monthly 1-2-1 supervision where we do professional and personal development.

Kevin Burnett said that the numbers of children placed outside of the area was a large proportion and asked if the majority of these were unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people.

The Head of Service for Children's Quality Assurance and Safeguarding replied that in terms of children out of area it is a real challenge because what B&NES Children's Services are really successful at is keeping children with their families and that is the best outcome if a child is placed with family members even if they live outside of B&NES. She added that what the report does not currently do is give enough breakdown of where those children are placed.

She explained that some unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people are placed in other areas of the country before even coming to B&NES, but as their corporate parents we've also got children with complex needs who have come into care of our Disabled Children's Team and we are working with their families to identify the best place for them. She added that B&NES do not have any residential settings within our area so any children that require residential care or really skilled complex care are going to be placed outside of B&NES so that the child's needs can be met.

Councillor Lesley Mansell referred to the transition of children into Adult Services and this remaining an area for improvement and asked for more detail on what is in place to improve that.

The Head of Service for Children's Quality Assurance and Safeguarding replied that the transition to Adult Social Care is a challenge and is something that both Adult Social Care and Children's Social Care are actively talking about and how to improve transition planning. She added that she had recently begun to undertake a piece of work as an independent person of the Council to look at a particular transition for a child and to look at any learning for all children as part of that and how we can think about practices, the different legislation and the different narratives used.

Councillor Mansell commented that it was welcome to see the improvement in terms of the voice of the child but asked what more can be done.

The Head of Service for Children's Quality Assurance and Safeguarding replied that part of the IRO role is to obtain the views and feelings of young people and that there is a strong advocacy service in B&NES provided by Off The Record. She said that they work closely with them to talk about what barriers there are.

She added that not every Child in Care wants an advocate and that the best thing to have is a good relationship between the child, their social worker and their carer to have a system around them that they can openly talk.

She said that she felt confident that in the Child in Care Review records you would be able to see the voice of the child, their aspirations, what we have celebrated and areas for them that we might need to improve or strengthen.

The Panel **RESOLVED** to:

- i) Note the challenges that have been identified within this reporting period, which has led to some children having changes in their IRO, with some children having had contact with two – three IRO's in this reporting period. There have also been periods where child in care reviews have not occurred within the statutory timeframes. Since the end of this reporting period, please note that the service has returned to having a full complement of staff and the substantive head of service has returned to the service, these factors have led to children receiving a much more consistent service and an improvement in the timeliness of child in care reviews, with 98% on time by Q2 of 2024-2025.

- ii) Promote the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for the children in the care of the Local Authority. Recognising the value that IRO's offer to children in care, the relationship at times being one of the most long standing and providing consistency for the child. IRO's seek to form positive relationships with the children in which they are allocated, empowering them to participate in their child in care reviews and share they wishes and feelings.

68 EDUCATION, HEALTH AND CARE PLAN (EHCPs) OVERVIEW

The Head of SEND introduced the report to the Panel. She explained that the numbers of Education Health and Care Plans continue to rise both nationally and in B&NES and that we have 4.9% against a national average of 4.8%.

She stated that B&NES receives around 500 applications for plans every year and that the number of plans issued was quite stable, at around 360 this year which was the same as in 2023 and 2022.

She said that the major challenge for the service is to keep up with the increasing number, those extra every year, on top of the ones we had before and the challenges around sufficiency, in particular around our special schools, our resource bases and our resources within our mainstream schools.

She addressed the issue of timeliness, the time it takes to get a plan to go through the process and said that she had been working with the local Parent & Carer Forum quite closely and listening to their views on this.

She explained that the data for September 2023 showed that we were at around 35% on time and that if we look at the requests that have come in for this calendar year we are at 39% on time which is an average of around about 24 weeks to issue instead of the 20 weeks.

She added that the parents and carers tell us that it is really the quality of the plan that is important and the quality of communication. She said that there were things that we could do within the service to improve that number, such as issuing plans before we have had all the reports back and then add them into the plan afterwards, then it looks like you have done it on time. She said but actually our parents and carers are telling us they don't really want us to do that they want a final high-quality plan rather than multiple different issuances of the same plan just for the sake of a 20 week timescale.

She said that if they could get all plans complete in 22 weeks then she would be happy with that.

She informed the Panel that she would like to address the matter of SEND Appeals, when a family appeal to a tribunal. She said that tribunal is the only recourse for the Local Authority and families when there is a disagreement between professionals around what is best to go into the plan, which school is correct for the child or young person or what provision is listed for them.

She explained that this is provided to us in the code of practice and that we would never choose to go to tribunal lightly, it would be because we have been unable to resolve the matter at the mediation stage.

She said that in 2024 we have had 81 mediation requests come through so far and 49% of those have been resolved prior to needing to go to a tribunal. She added for the majority of cases that do begin the tribunal process we would agree with the family before the final stage some kind of resolution.

She said that an example that comes up quite often for us is a family would like us to name an independent school, but we feel we have a maintained school that can meet the needs of the young person and so we work with that family to try to come to an agreement that works both for them and the child or young person, but also for the public purse around how much that placement will cost and quite often that might be a resolution around something like transport.

She referred to the subject of Annual Reviews and said that they were another important area raised by the Parent and Carer Forum and that they had improved issues around communication significantly. She said that the focus now was on enabling a review to take place every year. She added that at the moment around 53% this year of annual reviews had taken place this year and that this was some way away from where want to be.

She said that they were working within the Council to increase the workforce to be able to do that, though the challenge is the number of cases that our case officers hold and until we can bring that down we won't be able to improve some of these figures.

Councillor Joanna Wright referred to section 3.2 of the report which stated that we expect the increased expertise and support in schools will reduce the number of children and young people requiring an EHCP. She asked was this based on evidence as with an increase in EHCP need assessment requests and an increase in issued plans shouldn't we be prepared for a continued increase despite the increased expertise and support.

The Head of SEND replied that there was a lot of evidence that points to early intervention being very important for our children and young people and so the purpose of the SEND and AP Advice Service which started in September is to work with schools to intervene at the earliest point for children and young people to ensure that schools have the expertise required for the changing needs, that they can consider the curriculum, school layout environment etc and that we would expect that the increased support in schools, at that earlier stage, would reduce the amount of support needed later on for that child or young person.

She said that an example of this might be where there are mental health challenges for the young person and that the earlier that support is put into place the less likely it is to escalate to a point where significant intervention is needed. She added that whilst remaining optimistic the service has not planned to change its focus on

increasing its staffing numbers and has not changed our plans around looking for additional sufficiency within the area.

Councillor Wright referred to section 3.4 of the report and said the number of appeals lodged with SENDIST had increased significantly. She said that the cost for legal proceedings was around £200,000 since 2019. She asked what the Council was doing to decrease the number of appeals lodged as many appeals are about a needs assessment being refused and these are usually won at tribunal stage. She said wouldn't it lead to better outcomes for children if we were to refuse fewer needs assessments requests.

The Head of SEND replied there is a proportion that are due to the refusal of a needs assessment request and that this was a challenging thing for us to consider when you think about the amount of time that goes into a needs assessment, not only from the Local Authority, but also from our partners in the NHS and our Service Partners in the third sector.

She said that it therefore has to be a balanced approach and that we need our schools to support us in ensuring that we have enough information available to us to make the right decisions about needs assessments the first time around.

She added that often what happens is that we are awaiting certain documents or evidence of what the school has done to support the young person and if that is the case the panel won't be able to make an accurate decision unless we have those reports.

She added that as a result of this we often end up going to mediation and at the mediation point more documents are provided by the school or by other people and we are able to say yes we can now see that the two legal tests for the assessment are met.

She explained that this was another area where the SEND and AP Advice Service also comes into play and supporting our schools around what information needs to be put forward to the panel. She added that ideally you would rarely say no to a needs assessment request because your schools would be working with you in such a way that they would only submit when they had the right information and when it was necessary for them to do so.

She felt that what we might see is a slight drop in applications over the next few years but an increase on how many of them go through first time.

Councillor Wright referred to the matter of children being taken out of school and being homeschooled. She said that this situation can leave young people and their parents frustrated. She asked how we support the young people at that time and their families.

The Head of SEND replied that she would welcome coming back to the Panel to talk about Elective Home Education because she did not have those figures to hand.

Councillor Wright commented on the request for further staff and asked would this be enough as she had heard that one of the team members is currently responsible for 300 to 400 children each which seems to be quite a high number.

The Head of SEND replied that a full-time colleague could have between 250 and 300 children in their case load plus needs assessments on top of that. She said that is very high compared to other Local Authorities, so we have put in a staffing request, and we would want to see that number drop to around 150 - 160 if possible, to provide a much better service to our families and young people.

Councillor Onkar Saini asked what strategies are being implemented to increase the success rate of mediation and reduce the number of cases that proceed to a tribunal.

The Head of SEND replied that while there is a responsibility for the Local Authority to provide mediation for families there are cases when families do not take up that offer of mediation and decide to go to tribunal instead which is their right to do so. She added that this was one of the things that we are working really hard to resolve because if we can't get together and work with that family we can't move things forward effectively for them.

She said they were seeking to improve communication with the families beforehand to ask why they are choosing not to go to mediation as the wait for a tribunal is about a year at the moment, whereas mediation is much quicker it is usually around six weeks, so we can resolve quicker if we get to do mediation.

Councillor Saini asked what measures are being taken to improve the timeliness of EHCP assessments to ensure they are completed within the statutory 20 week timeframe.

The Head of SEND replied that some of that does come down to the capacity of the team, but said a plan is only of high quality if the advice that we receive is of high quality and if we don't get all the reports in on time we can't write the plan. She said that a Quality Assurance Officer is working closely with our partners around the timeliness of their submission of their evidence towards the plan and we have recently recruited a Designated Social Care Officer within the Local Authority to help coordinate with Social Care because their advice is important to go into the plan.

Kevin Burnett commented that the most common need for an EHCP seemed to be around autism and speech and language. He asked how things were progressing in terms of maybe trying to head these off with early interventions and whether there are the resources to be able to do that.

The Head of SEND replied that as well as early interventions for autism and speech and language she would say that social and emotional mental health was a factor. She said that the SEND and AP Advice Service have an instrumental role in that, but so do our partners in our commissioned services.

She said that the quality of the practitioners that we have managed to recruit into those roles was excellent.

Kevin Burnett asked if the SEND and AP Advice Service were involved with all schools before they submit any needs assessment.

The Head of SEND replied that the SEND and AP Advice Service have been in contact with 63% of primary schools this year since they opened in September. She added that she believed that they have been to all our maintained secondary schools. She said they were working hard to not only step in when a needs assessment is turned down, but step in at a much earlier stage through things like our SENCO conferences.

Kevin Burnett referred to the subject of Annual Reviews and asked who is responsible for carrying them out, the school or the Local Authority.

The Head of SEND replied that the local Authority delegates the responsibility to the school to hold the review, however there have been a number of Ombudsman's decisions, not against our Local Authority, that have said that the Local Authorities need to chase to ensure they have taken place.

She added that again it was not about the actual meeting it was the processing of the paperwork afterwards that was the problem. She added that the Local Authority do not need to attend these meetings unless there is a change of placement or something similar being asked. She said that they were still pursuing a technology solution around having a portal so that parents, schools and the Local Authority can better monitor what is happening with that paperwork and reducing the workload.

Councillor Paul Crossley proposed a further recommendation to call on the Cabinet Member for Children's Services to argue the case within the budget setting process to support the request for staffing increases to reduce the case load to approaching 150 cases per member of staff.

Councillor Joanna Wright seconded the motion.

Councillor Liz Hardman asked what happens to those children who refuse to go to school because they are unable to be in that environment without the right levels of support in place.

The Head of SEND replied that the responsibility for providing education for those young people still sits with the school even if they are not able to come into school. She added that we would want the school to be working with the families and young people to try to repair that relationship and to really get underneath what has meant that the young person feels that they can no longer come into school.

She explained that the school should be going out to the home and try to support the young person to come back, putting in reasonable adjustments and to build relationships for that young person to reattend the school.

Councillor Hardman asked if the portal that was mentioned briefly, so parents can access their case notes and check the progress of their case was up and running yet.

The Head of SEND replied that was still in the early discussion stages and they have had a number of hurdles to get past as a service in order to move forward, but were committed to doing that. She added that they are continuing to work with colleagues in the wider Council team to be able to move forward but it would likely be at least another year.

Councillor Wright asked if there was a wider question that needed to be considered in terms of assessments and autism and the time it takes to get a diagnosis through the NHS.

The Head of SEND replied that a lot of work was ongoing around autism or neurodiversity pathways but the EHCP needs assessment is a needs-based assessment and so whilst some services will require a diagnosis to access them the plan itself and the EHC needs assessment should not be held up by not having an autism diagnosis. She added that it should be based purely on the needs of the young person and how they are presenting at that time.

She explained that it was important that this part of the process tries to focus on the social model rather than the medical model of disability in order to ensure that every child gets the support they need for school regardless of any diagnosis.

The Director for Education & Safeguarding commented and offered some reassurance to the Panel to say that they do have a dashboard which they use to tell us the patterns to which practitioners respond on time and that if advice is late, we will record it so that we can put together a much more accurate picture around what the reasons for lateness were.

He also thanked the Head of SEND for her work over the past 15 months in supporting the team, bringing new people in and going through a full business change process.

He informed the Panel about a pilot with the B&NES Parent Carer Forum for a year that would be providing emotional support. He added that they do commission a lot of additional services for those children who don't necessarily have an EHCP but are out of school and that the Student Family Support Service have a range of services that parents can access outside of that as well.

The Chair asked if the additional staff mentioned by the Head of SEND is included in the £179,000 already being consulted on within the budget.

The Director for Education & Safeguarding replied that this was in addition to that and that officers were looking to make a separate request so we can support additional temporary staff to help us with some of the backlog.

The Panel **RESOLVED** to;

- i) Note the national, regional and local picture regarding the increase in applications for Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCPNA) and the increase in issued plans as detailed in the attached slides.

- ii) Be assured that Local Authority Officers continue to work strategically with social care, health, schools and other partners in order to work within statutory guidelines and support schools in delivering the very best outcomes for our children and young people.
- iii) Call on the Cabinet Member for Children's Services to argue the case within the budget setting process to support the request for staffing increases to reduce the case load to approaching 150 cases per member of staff.

69 PANEL WORKPLAN

The Chair introduced this item to the Panel and the following topics were raised as potential future agenda items.

- Vaccination Programme
- School Streets Update (Councillor Wait)
- Music Service
- Elective Home Education
- Budget Proposals 2025/26
- RUH Building Plan

The meeting ended at 1.45 pm

Chair(person) _____

Date Confirmed and Signed _____

Prepared by Democratic Services