

## **Lead Member PDS Report 14/07/2025.**

### **Senior Manager changes in Children's Services.**

Jean Kelly will start as the new Director of Children's Services (DCS) for B&NES on Monday, August 18. Jean is currently the Deputy Director of Children's Social Care in Oxfordshire. Jean has a wealth of experience in Children's Services and will bring new expertise to our area to lead B&NES on our ongoing improvement journey.

Chris Wilford will remain as the Interim DCS until Jean starts, then return to his substantive role of Director of Education & Safeguarding. Phoebe Holland started her role as interim Assistant Director of Children's Services on June 2, 2025. I would also like to formally thank Leigh Zwyek, who has now left B&NES to join South Gloucestershire Council. Her leadership and support whilst in B&NES have been outstanding.

The council has also employed an interim AD for Transformation. Paula Sumner is supporting Children's Services with the implementation of Families First, improving processes for establishing placements and reviewing high-cost placements. Paula brings a wealth of experience from working at a senior level across several local authorities.

### **Inspection of Local Authority Children Services - ILACS inspection**

B&NES received formal notification from Ofsted on Monday, 2nd June 2025 that a short ILACS (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services) inspection would take place. This type of inspection is used when services are already judged to be good or outstanding and there are no significant concerns requiring a full inspection.

The inspection was conducted over two weeks:

- **Week 1 (off-site):** Review of performance data, audit samples, key documents (including the Self-Evaluation Framework), and interviews with senior leaders, including the Chief Executive, Lead Member, and CAFCASS
- **Week 2 (on-site):** Fieldwork including case sampling, staff interviews, and engagement with partners, parents, carers, and young people. There was a particular focus on education for children in care, children missing education, and those in elective home education.

Inspectors focused on three core questions:

1. Has the quality and impact of practice been maintained?
2. Are there areas where practice has improved?
3. Are there areas where practice has deteriorated?

The outcome of the inspection is embargoed until the report is published at the end of July. I would like to thank all the staff who were involved or supported this inspection. It was an incredibly busy time, and I am very proud of all the staff, young people, and parent/carers who participated in the preparation and interview weeks.

### **Public Health Young People Survey**

The latest B&NES Children and Young People's Schools Health and Wellbeing Survey plans to commence recruitment for the 2026 survey with secondary schools in the autumn term and primary schools in the new year. Results won't be available until summer or autumn 2026. Public Health leads the survey, and a PDS slot will be arranged for the Director of Public Health to share the findings.

### **Free School Meals**

#### **Auto-enrolment.**

We identified approximately 540 households with around 769 children who were potentially entitled to Free School Meals but had no current claim. Officers wrote to these households to confirm that we would automatically enrol their child unless we hear back from them to opt out of the service.

Seven households have opted out – most provided no reason. Some advised that their child would be leaving education, and some advised that their benefits had changed since we sent out the letters.

From July we will carry out a final check using the eligibility checking service and will log these claims onto the EYES system. This will be a large piece of work and will take around a month. We will then confirm in writing whether each household is eligible or not. We plan to conduct this process annually. Initial indications suggest that approximately 462 households will likely be eligible for free school meals. We don't know yet how many children will be brought into the scheme through this process.

#### **New rules from September 2026.**

Entitlement to Benefit related free school meals will be determined on whether a family receives Universal Credit, rather than whether they receive Universal Credit and have income below £7,400 per year.

The Government has forecast that this will mean an additional 500,000 children will be brought into the system, representing a 23% increase. Based on the current number of children on free school meals in B&NES, which stands at 4,906, this will result in an additional 1,128 children receiving free school meals from September 2026.

We believe that we will capture at least 462 of these children through our auto-enrolment process this year, so estimate that **666** additional pupils will qualify for free school meals from September 2026.

This is important because the rules regarding eligibility for the Pupil Premium are not changing from the current criteria, which are based on being in receipt of Universal Credit with a household income from earnings below £7,400.00.

Schools will face additional costs for providing more meals to children from 2026, but will not receive additional funding through the Pupil Premium to cover these costs.

### **Transitional Protection.**

Families whose children currently receive free school meals will continue to be entitled even if their benefits cease until the child's next phase of education under Transitional Protection rules. These rules will end from September 2026, when entitlement will be based on eligibility to Universal Credit, and regular checks will need to be made to ensure that families remain entitled to free school meals. The Government have advised that further guidance will be issued in due course, but at this point the council plans to carry out a review of entitled families during the summer period each year, to enrol those who are entitled but not claiming, and to de-register those who are receiving free school meals but are no longer entitled.

The end of transitional protection will mean that some households will lose out on this support; however, it is not possible at this point to estimate the exact number of households that will be affected.

### **Baroness Casey report into Child Sexual Abuse.**

This report will need to be examined closely, and its recommendations reviewed by the B&NES Community Safety and Safeguarding Partnership (BCSSP). At the BCSSP Children's Safeguarding Strategic Assurance Group meeting on 26th June 2025, we reviewed correspondence from the Avon & Somerset Police (A&SP) in relation to Baroness Casey's report into CSA, proposing a shared and proactive piece of work across our safeguarding partnerships.

Whilst some of the activity for the twelve recommendations will be driven nationally, the A&SP propose that they want to consider now the actions or interventions that need to happen at a local level and propose that the police coordinate the response to this under the leadership of Detective Superintendent James Wasiak. This work aims to consolidate and strengthen existing initiatives, rather than duplicate them, and, where possible, integrate improvements into Families First workstreams and JTAI preparation for sexual abuse.

A multi-agency task and finish group is being formed, with representation from police, local authorities, health, education and the voluntary sector. The group would scope the work and propose a practical delivery plan, with clear objectives and timelines which could align with local business plans. Actions could include:

1. Undertaking a gap analysis of the twelve recommendations to map and understand our effective practice and local areas of concern

2. Reviewing and consolidating information-sharing protocols to ensure consistency and timeliness across agencies
3. Building a shared understanding as to how we can improve the quality and consistency of data recording relating to group-based CSE, with a view to identifying themes and informing disruption and support strategies.

Whilst this needs to be an Avon and Somerset-wide approach to progress it, the BCSSP thinks this is a proactive and proportionate proposal. This will be monitored through the Strategic Assurance Group.

As this work progresses, the BCSSP will ensure that Policy Development and Scrutiny is updated through a comprehensive report.

### **School attendance and exclusions**

Officers presented a report on school attendance and exclusions for the academic year 23/24 to this panel in October 2024. We will present the school attendance and exclusions report for the 2024/25 academic year again at the PDS panel in October 2025.

### **Implementation of Families First**

As the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, I am fully supportive of the implementation of Families First, a significant piece of work that I will continue to update the panel on.

The Children's Transformation Steering Group has formally approved the Governance and Terms of Reference for the BANES Families First Partnership Programme as of May 2025. This approval delineates the specific workstreams and their respective leads. The programme encompasses areas such as Family Help, the Integrated Front Door, and Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams (MACPTs), ensuring that families receive prompt and effective support and intervention. Additionally, cross-cutting working groups, including Workforce and Systems, as well as Intelligence, will provide essential support to ensure the seamless implementation of these initiatives.

Consultative groups will be established, comprising internal staff, partner agencies, service users, to ensure that any changes are informed and co-designed. Discovery work has commenced to gather comprehensive data on demand, caseloads, staffing, financials, and commissioned provisions. The objective is to identify gaps and needs, ensuring that services can meet demands proactively, support families effectively, and reduce the escalation of needs and associated costs.

A temporary AD for transformation and Business Change staff are supporting the local transformation programme. These costs are partially covered by DFE funding, but the overall cost will not be. We are currently lobbying the DFE, alongside other LA's with small financial allocations for fairer funding that meets not just our set-up costs, but the costs of running truly multi-disciplinary teams.

The ultimate goal is to develop a holistic understanding of current and required services to meet early intervention needs, align with the national Families First Programme, and enhance support for families, thereby reducing the costs associated with acute services.

I am confident that these efforts will continue the progress our teams make to significantly improve the lives of children and families in our community.

### **Safety Valve**

On 30 May, we received a response from the DfE following the resubmission of our safety valve plan. We were given encouraging feedback, including that our plan "places strong emphasis on early identification, inclusion, quality EHCPs, and local sufficiency, and aims to ensure needs are met closer to home in a timely, coordinated manner" and is "ambitious in its aims and scope and is supported by appropriate governance, realistic phasing, and a clear delivery structure." They said that it was "evident that [we] have made progress across all three key workstreams."

However, they do want us to consider parts of the plan to highlight programme benefits & tracking data for SEND sufficiency. We are already completing some of this work, so this is very deliverable for us. Frustratingly, the DfE also wants us to complete work on the impact of delays in capital projects, especially the two Free Schools (one special and one alternative provision site) on Culverhay. The panel is reminded that the current delay is caused by the DfE's pause in implementing all school capital projects that haven't yet 'broken ground'. This remains incredibly frustrating to me as the cabinet member, and despite repeated attempts to be provided with a date for when the decision on these schools will be made, the DfE will not commit to any information. Officers will work on the plan to demonstrate options for mitigating the DfE delays on these projects.

### **Youth Guarantee Trailblazer.**

The West of England Combined Authority (WECA) Youth Guarantee Trailblazer is a national pilot initiative that supports young people aged 18–21 who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Bath & North East Somerset (B&NES) is one of eight participating regions, delivering a locally tailored work package focused on rural access and wraparound support.

The program addresses rural barriers through transportation options, such as bus passes and bike loans. It aims to provide meaningful training and employment opportunities, with a particular focus on rural areas. The program includes community-based support such as drop-ins, mock interviews, and a NEET engagement event. Running until March 31st, 2026, it is funded through a £5 million national allocation, with B&NES receiving a share to deliver its local model.

The initiative includes an Employability Coach and an Information, Advice, and Guidance Officer who offer personalised support and guidance. Collaborations with local employers and organisations help create job opportunities and ensure delivery in the areas where young people live. The program also involves working with Youth Voice

groups to gather feedback and promote available support. Efforts are made to address additional needs, such as mental health and well-being, and marketing materials have been developed to raise awareness of these issues. Currently, there are five referrals for various supports, and partnerships with local providers enhance the project's impact.

The scheme is led in the Economy & Skills part of the Council under Sophie Broadfield; however, it is of interest to me and a valuable area of work that I wanted to highlight to the Children's Scrutiny Panel.