

BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET

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

Monday 9th March 2026

Present:- Councillors Dine Romero (Chair), Paul Crossley, David Harding, Dr Eleanor Jackson (in place of Lesley Mansell), Joanna Wright, Bharat Pankhania and Michael Auton

Also in attendance: Jean Kelly (Director of Children's Services & Education), Phoebe Holland (Interim Assistant Director), Lucy Baker (Director of Place, CYP, LDAND), Christopher Wilford (Director of Education), Ceri Williams (Policy Development & Scrutiny Officer), Laura Donnelly (Head of SEND) and Darryl Freeman (Executive Director Operations)

87 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

88 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chair drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

89 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor Lesley Mansell, Councillor Onkar Saini, Councillor Liz Hardman and Kevin Burnett had sent their apologies to the Panel. Councillor Eleanor Jackson was present as a substitute for Councillor Mansell for the duration of the meeting.

90 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

91 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN

There was none.

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

Councillor Ruth Malloy addressed the Panel, a summary of her statement is set out below.

'Having only recently formally joined the B&NES Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE), I'm not really in a position to comment about the work of SACRE during the period from September 2024 to August 2025, which this

SACRE Annual Report covers. However, it's a very thorough and well-written report, compiled by our Adviser Rebekah Guy, and I commend it to you!

When invited to join the SACRE, I was initially unsure about it, as I'm not aligned to any particular religion. However, I then decided this could be something positive: to be curious and seek that which all faiths have in common. I've now also joined the Bath Inter-Faith Group, which I think complements the activities of the SACRE very well, by raising awareness locally about different faith communities.

I look forward to working with Cllr. Eleanor Jackson, Kevin Burnett and the other members of the SACRE in the coming year, especially on developing the Agreed Syllabus, which is currently undergoing a review. The Government's recent decision to include Religious Education in the National Curriculum will also be an interesting development to follow and contribute to.'

Becky Somerset, Director,3SG addressed the Panel, a summary of her statement is set out below.

'I am speaking today on behalf of the Third Sector in B&NES, representing 3SG's membership network of 260 charities.

I wanted to make members aware of the most recent Council Budget for 26/27, which has referred to £250,000 worth of savings to be made from Contract Management - Delivering Greater Value.

It is expected that a list of the Council's largest contracts will be drawn up to see how these savings could be made. We hope this list would primarily focus on multi-million pound contracts via Waste and Highways, but I must flag that there are larger contracts that go to the Third Sector, the further down the list you go.

Whilst I have been separately assured by both the new Chief Executive of the Council and the Director of Resources that charity contracts will not be touched, I want to keep the risk associated with cuts of any kind at the forefront of members' minds. Many of our contracts have historically been run with zero or very little uplift, with services running at a loss to the charities delivering them. This is completely unsustainable.

The NHS 10 year plan and the ICB's focus on preventative care in communities mean that investment needs to be made in these services. Cost cutting exercises, no matter how small, could mean closure for some services that are really struggling to deliver with dwindling resources and eventual increased costs to the Council in order to meet statutory responsibilities.

For too long, the Third Sector has been expected to find a way. Our options are dwindling - there is less funding available and competition is greater than ever before. This downward spiral cannot and must not continue because our residents will suffer if services close.

I have asked to be kept informed as this list develops, because I fear that if larger contract renegotiations fail, the Third Sector will be an easy target. I would call for

more open, transparent budget setting in future, with the Sector consulted on any changes that might affect them.

Contracts that could be affected are services for our most vulnerable residents, including domestic abuse survivors, children with autism, early years, teenagers who need support, advice services to residents in significant debt and services that help support older people to live in their own homes. Many individuals may rely on several of these services.

In Wiltshire, a framework has been developed following an LGA peer review, which sets out clear expectations around how the Council and Third Sector should be working together. I hope that this can be created in B&NES, too.

Our ask is that scrutiny panel members continue to champion the sector in all conversations that you might have. We need investment and good working relationships, not the gradual erosion of contracts and services that leaves organisations with uncertain futures.'

Councillor Bharat Pankhania commented that he would support putting a system in place that allows for pre-budget decision discussions to be held with Third Sector representatives / organisations.

Councillor Joanna Wright said she would welcome the Council to take part in a similar peer review process to establish ways in which it could work more effectively with the Third Sector.

Becky Somerset said that there were good relationships in place with the BSW ICB with regard to co-production / design. She added that she believed that the new BANES Chief Executive was open to exploring similar arrangements.

Lucy Baker, BSW ICB Place Director commented that the ICB is committed to working alongside local partners and developing a blueprint to make more decisions at place.

The Executive Director for People said that the leadership team within the Council were open to working differently in the future and stated that the budget for individual agencies has not changed, with the savings identified through the management of contracts.

Councillor Eleanor Jackson said she would welcome further assurances regarding this area of the budget.

The Executive Director for People said that the proposed £250,000 saving was to be sought through contract management and that existing contracts would not be affected. He added that tough questions and decisions are always raised through the budget setting process. He acknowledged that there is now a shift in resources towards early intervention that is aligned with other bodies.

Kate Morton, CEO, Bath Mind said that she welcomed the offers to work closely together in the future. She added that it was important for all to understand what

services are provided as statutory, those that come under the Care Act and those that are preventative which will likely lead to less costs to the Council in the future.

Councillor Wright commented that she remained slightly confused as such small details are shared within the budget reports and said that as much information as possible should be shared with all Councillors ahead of the budget being set in the coming years.

Councillor Paul May, Cabinet Member for Children's Services stated that he recognises the work of 3SG through his roles within the Cabinet and the Health & Wellbeing Board and supports them as they bring much added value.

Mark Baldwin addressed the Panel, a summary of his statement is set out below.

'I have worked as a volunteer for the Connecting Families Team for the past ten years.

As a long-standing volunteer for the Connecting Families Team in Bath and North East Somerset, I was shocked and dismayed to discover that this service is being deleted, in the wake of a national change to Children's Services. The government's policy change does not require this action, but the authority has chosen to destroy an award-winning service that has been phenomenally successful in turning around the lives of children and their families in local communities.

Families severely disadvantaged by mental ill health, unemployment, and poverty, have had their lives transformed by the family-centred and collaborative approach of the team. This is what I have observed but, from the feedback that the team always seeks from people using the service, this is also what they almost invariably tell them.

Children's Services managers seem to want to say goodbye to providing a service that will prevent some families' difficulties getting worse to concentrate far more on intervening when families fall apart. This seems stupid and wasteful to me. We all know that prevention and early help works.

I find it hard to believe that the collective talents of this team are being ignored by the most senior management with team members either being made redundant or pushed into jobs where their skills will be sidelined.

I also understand that these changes were made without elected representatives being informed. Deleting a successful service, much valued by local people, without discussing the implications with councillors elected by those people to represent their interests seems strange and somewhat devious to me.

My hope is that the Council will be able to change its mind about these changes and reinstate the Connecting Families Team.'

Councillor Wright said that she was alarmed to hear about this decision and asked if he could explain why little more about his volunteer role.

Mark Baldwin replied that he took part in events that provide support for children and their families. He added that a lot of his work involved craft and nature and encouraging young people to be creative. He said that his role provided an opportunity to learn more about the young people and their families.

Councillor Jackson commented that when Ward Councillors are contacted initially it can be hard to recognise what support is required and gave an example of how putting a resident in contact with the Connecting Families team had helped them immensely following an incident of domestic violence.

Mark Baldwin replied that this was very typical of their work and that they were able to provide information on a range of local bodies that can provide support.

The Chair, on behalf of the Panel, thanked all the speakers for their statements.

93 MINUTES: 19TH JANUARY 2026

The Panel confirmed the minutes of the previous meeting as a true record and they were duly signed by the Chair.

94 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

Councillor Paul May, Cabinet Member for Children's Services addressed the Panel. He stated that he does recognise the values of the Connecting Families service and said that the proposed changes were currently in a consultation phase. He said that he was prepared to bring further information back to the Panel.

The Chair stated that she would welcome an update sooner rather than later.

Councillor May agreed and said that Members should be aware of any decision. He added that it was an officer process at present and that the timeline for the consultation has been extended.

He explained that Families First would change the role of the Local Authority and some of its aspects with regard to Social Care by seeking to provide an integrated front door. He added that there would be a focus on early intervention and prevention that would aim to provide support before problems escalate, reducing the need for statutory, long-term intervention.

The Director of Children's Services and Education added that it is the intention to create multi-discipline teams that combine staff from Early Help, Child in Need, Child Protection and other services which will lead to families experiencing the least changes possible through their support provision.

She said that staff from Connecting Families would be brought into this work and that there was a need to develop a broader approach to family group decision making.

The Chair asked if the process has been explained to all staff concerned.

The Director of Children's Services and Education replied that information regarding the proposals has been available for some time and that workshops and engagement sessions have been held prior to the formal consultation.

The Executive Director for People added that he was committed to meeting with staff to discuss their concerns.

Councillor Joanna Wright commented that she felt this decision would lead to the service becoming more challenged. She added that as a Corporate Parent it was important for every child to be looked after to the highest standard.

She stated that staff need to feel empowered and that she was disappointed by the process to date.

Councillor May reiterated that the consultation remains ongoing and that he would listen and work with the Director of Children's Services to find a solution for the staff and the children. He said that he values the staff highly and would seek to do better.

The Chair said that she acknowledged that this was a difficult time for all concerned and encouraged work to be carried out to find a solution.

The Executive Director for People said he was aware of the Council's Corporate Parent role and was not able to deliver any further information at this stage as the consultation was ongoing.

Councillor Wright informed the Panel that she had received a number of questions from the absent Councillor Liz Hardman which she would forward to Democratic Services so that they could be responded to by officers. She asked Councillor May if the Cabinet were 100% behind what the officers have done or have they asked them to restart the official consultation once it has been made fit for purpose.

Councillor May replied that he would need to appropriate advice before answering the question.

The Executive Director for People said that officers would seek to answer the questions submitted to the best of their ability, but said that depending on the nature of the questions some information may be of a confidential nature.

Councillor Wright asked if staff remained motivated at work.

The Executive Director for People replied that he could see and was aware that some staff were angry and upset and that there was a need to support them.

Councillor David Harding asked if the proposed changes would affect the statistical targets for delivering EHCPs.

The Director of Children's Services and Education replied that it would be Children's Social Care that is likely to be more affected by the discussed proposals rather than Education. She said that the proposals were sought to seek improvements and reduce interventions. She added that the service was modelled on the basis of a caseload of 15 children per Social Worker, some with less.

Councillor Eleanor Jackson commented that she had made a recent suggestion to a senior officer in the Council that all Social Workers should be briefed about the role of a Ward Councillor and the concept of Corporate Parenting.

The Chair asked that officers take this proposal from Councillor Jackson away and consider what action to be taken.

Councillor May wished to thank Councillor Wright for her role in enabling the "Tree of Life", a rare sapling from the felled Sycamore Gap tree to be planted in Alice Park, Bath as a symbol of resilience and hope for children and young people in care.

Councillor May highlighted the following points from his published update.

Education and SEND White Paper

The Government's new Education and SEND white paper, Every Child Achieving and Thriving, released on 23rd February 2026. This marks a significant national shift towards a broader, more inclusive education system, with a clear focus on re-engaging families, reducing persistent absence, and strengthening the services surrounding schools. The Government has presented this as a long-term reform programme designed to take the education system "into the 2030s and beyond," indicating that implementation will be phased and sustained over a number of years.

Officers will now begin interpreting what these reforms could mean for B&NES. The DfE has asked all LAs, including our Local Area Inclusion Partnership, to start working with partners and schools to complete a DfE Maturity Matrix to assist with advanced preparation for the reforms. I will report back to the Panel as this analysis and assessment develops.

Important to note that we are expected to continue operating in the current SEND system until March 29, whilst preparing for the implementation of the reforms. We expect demand for EHCPs to increase during this period.

B&NES Safety Valve Programme

We have received formal written confirmation from the DfE that the national Safety Valve programme has now officially closed. In addition, the DfE has confirmed that it will fund 90% of all remaining high needs deficits accumulated up to the end of the 2025/26 financial year. These accumulated deficits are currently held by all Local Authorities, but do not form part of the council's overall budget due to a Government statutory override.

B&NES Free Schools – Update

As I write this update, officers are finalising our plans and response to the DfE regarding our commitment to the delivery of Free Schools on the Culverhay site.

Councillor Jackson addressed the Panel regarding the BANES SACRE Annual Report September 2024- August 2025. She thanked the Cabinet Member for his continued support.

She said that SACRE had achieved a considerable amount, but navigating the proposed national and regional developments, and ensuring every child in BANES receives high quality RE, an appreciation of traditions other than their own as well as the tools to develop their own inner spirituality and moral standards will be a challenge.

She stated that she was pleased that the Annual Report is now published to this Panel and felt that their engagement with schools had improved.

She stated that defining so called British values, which are really derived from the Western European Enlightenment, relating RE to the national curriculum and encouraging academic study remains a challenge.

She added that working out the best Agreed Syllabus for BANES, whether national or not was also key and that providing high quality resources is only the beginning of the story.

She thanked all the officers for their work throughout the year.

Councillor Michael Auton said that he was concerned that investment in SEND in North East Somerset should also continue, in particular through a nursery in his ward.

Councillor May replied that the new Free School was due to provide support for all young people across BANES between the ages of 4 – 19.

Councillor Wright said that travel to the new school would still be a challenge for many pupils and their families and they were likely to need further support. She added that mainstream schools need to be resourced properly in this regard and that Home to School Transport should be scrutinised by the Council.

She called for local MATs, not just situated within BANEs, to be more involved in this type of discussion.

Councillor May said that representatives from the Regional Office for the Department of Education have been asked to attend the Panel once a year. He added that it should be recognised that performance within schools is good on the whole and that issues are raised at the School Standards Board.

Councillor Jackson commented that she would welcome the Panel to receive further information relating to MATs as this issue progresses. She asked if the Hindu temple, currently sited within Culverhay, could be given assistance to relocate if required.

Councillor May replied that he believed that it was almost certain that the temple could be retained on the site. He said that he would also look to provide more information, performance etc. relating to MATS, to the Panel on a regular basis.

Councillor Jackson asked how much dialogue the Education team has with Planning / Housing officers with regard to SEND pupils expected through new housing developments.

Councillor May replied that this was a matter for the Local Plan to consider alongside other factors such as roads, health, social care and more. He added that the Health & Wellbeing Board has also raised this as an issue to be considered.

The Chair, on behalf of the Panel, thanked Councillor May for his update.

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

Lucy Baker, BANES Place Director, BSW ICB addressed the Panel. She announced that a 45 day consultation would commence on March 18th 2026 regarding restructuring proposals within the ICB.

BSW Integrated Care Board Five Year Strategic Commissioning Plan

BSW ICB has developed a new five year -year plan setting out how we will further transform health services over the next five years, working as part of a new cluster with Dorset and Somerset Integrated Care Boards.

The plan takes forward the work previously set out in the BSW Integrated Care Partnership strategy, and articulated in our BSW Care Model, and now incorporates the ambitions articulated in the last year's national NHS Ten Year Plan.

Kingfisher Unit update

This is a new ten bed specialist learning disability and autism inpatient and outreach service located at the Blackberry Hill Hospital site in Fishponds, Bristol. The service is a key part of regional plans to increase specialist inpatient capacity and improve admission pathways across the South West.

Recently, there was a flood at The Kingfisher which has caused significant damage to the building. This is going to delay the completion of the build, its handover and ultimately its opening to patients. This is really disappointing for everyone who has been involved in the project so far, and those who have been preparing to commence work within the new service.

The project team have been working with construction partners since the flood was discovered to get a clearer understanding of how much damage has been caused, and the remedial work required. It is essential that this assessment is detailed and thorough and when finalised, it should give us the clarity required to help us plan a revised completion, handover and opening timetable.

Oral health and dental update

BSW ICB remains committed to establishing a network of local mobile dental clinics that will make accessing dentistry easier and more convenient for people living in all parts of Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire.

Our Big Brush Club supervised toothbrushing scheme is commissioned by the ICB and supported by BSW's three local authorities and delivered in schools by professionals. It aims to tackle deteriorating rates of oral health among disadvantaged young people. We are awaiting information on current activity and will offer an update at the next meeting.

We can confirm that there is no contractual requirement for promotion in dental practices as per a previous query but this will be reviewed with public health colleagues moving forward to explore any opportunities.

Termination of Pregnancy information

The update in the agenda pack summarised activity across BSW and included the British Pregnancy Advisory Services (BPAS) and Marie Stopes International. It focussed on the use of early medical abortion (EMA) through telemedicine/pills by post, a service allowing people to receive medication for an early medical abortion (up to 10 weeks gestation) via mail, after a phone or video consultation with a provider. It also included the number of patients requiring treatment beyond 10 weeks' gestation, and the age profile of people accessing termination services.

Councillor Joanna Wright asked how the pregnancy termination figures for the BSW ICB area compares with other areas.

Lucy Baker replied that it was just below the national average.

Councillor Wright noted that the age bracket of 25 – 36 was the highest for using these services and asked if that cohort specifically would have access to relevant information on this matter.

The Consultant in Public Health replied that there was good awareness and access to these services throughout BANES.

Councillor Wright asked if it was known how much funding NHS Dentists within BANES had returned within the past financial year.

Lucy Baker replied that she did not have that information to hand but would seek it for the Panel.

Councillor Michael Auton commented that he understood the need to provide a 'consistent digital offer' but was concerned that older residents should not become disenfranchised.

Lucy Baker replied that support will be provided to residents that may struggle with digital access and said that as part of the Neighbourhood Plan a number of workshops would be held in April / May.

Councillor Auton asked if any further cohorts have been considered for public engagement with regard to Neighbourhood Health.

Lucy Baker replied that they were in the process of working with the Community Wellbeing Hub to establish which groups to next involve.

Councillor Auton asked if it was known which schools did or did not take part in the 'Big Brush Club' and whether there was anything the Council / Councillors could do to encourage participation.

Lucy Baker replied that she would attempt to find out this information and reply to the Panel.

Councillor Auton asked if individual carers were offered any support in terms of access to vaccinations.

Lucy Baker replied that a broad level of support was available and would enquire if any specific measures were available.

Councillor David Harding asked if there were plans to bring the Blood Pressure Roadshows to the rural areas of BANES.

Lucy Baker replied that there are plans to expand the project into a whole Local Authority offer in the long term.

Councillor Harding asked if the North East Somerset areas of the Council would be part of the review to ascertain which areas would benefit most from mobile dental clinics.

Lucy Baker replied that they would and said that this remained a priority for the ICB.

Councillor Bharat Pankhania said that it was important that the Panel knows the state of play in terms of what access residents have to emergency contraceptives.

The Consultant in Public Health replied that there was a local contract in place for EHC (Emergency Hormonal Contraception) and that this would be available through most pharmacies, their local doctor or the Riverside Clinic.

Councillor Pankhania stated that it was very important for all children to have dental provision provided to them through the NHS.

Lucy Baker replied that this was acknowledged as a top priority on a national level and would provide regular updates to the Panel.

Councillor Eleanor Jackson asked if any update could be provided on the recent norovirus cases in the local area.

Lucy Baker replied that she was aware of the recent incident at the RUH and said that the hospital was open and operating on a business-as-usual basis.

The Chair, on behalf of the Panel, thanked Lucy for the update provided.

96 FUTURE OF BSW LONG COVID SERVICE

Lucy Baker, BANES Place Director, BSW ICB addressed the Panel and highlighted the following areas from the report.

Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire Integrated Care Board (BSW ICB) is reviewing the future of its long Covid service in response to significantly declining demand and increasing financial pressures. This paper sets out the context, options considered, preferred approach, and proposed engagement with local communities and scrutiny committees. It seeks the views of the committee on the scale of the proposed change and the approach to engagement.

The committee is asked to consider and comment on:

1. Whether the proposed changes constitute a substantial variation to services.
2. Whether the proposed engagement approach is proportionate.

She also offered to bring a further report to a subsequent Panel.

Councillor David Harding said that he would query whether people who have Long Covid or feel that they might have it know how to access the current support service.

Lucy Baker replied that she would take that point back to the ICB. She added that a meaningful engagement will be carried out to assess the future of the service.

Councillor Bharat Pankhania said that he wished to emphasise that the country was still in unknown territory with regard to its knowledge of Long Covid and said that there some emerging trends relating to disabilities and other health consequences. He stated that a degree of watchfulness must be retained.

Councillor Eleanor Jackson suggested that GP's could seek to assign a specialist on Long Covid within their practices.

Lucy Baker replied that she would take these comments back to the ICB.

The Chair stated that she did not feel that the Panel, at this time, could determine whether the proposed changes constitute a substantial variation to services and asked that they be updated as the engagement process continues.

97 THE EDUCATION ATTAINMENT GAP

The Director of Education & Safeguarding addressed the Panel and highlighted the following points to the Panel.

- The report provides the Panel with an overview of early years and school education performance in the academic year 2024-25, and the work underway to address inequalities in educational attainment. He said that the Council were committed in their attempts to achieving improved performances.
- A slight improvement in KS2 educational outcomes for Free School Meal (FSM) eligible children, however, the attainment gap between FSM pupils in B&NES and nationally is significant: 36% of B&NES FSM pupils achieve the

expected standard in reading, writing, and maths, compared to 48% nationally.

- Children with SEN Support and an EHCP perform better in all key stages than regional and national averages.
- The Local Authority remains committed to delivering initiatives with education settings to enhance outcomes for Free School Meal (FSM) pupils. Our efforts focus on the early years, where the LA can have the most impact. This year's budget includes additional funding to expand the delivery of our Language for Life programme, now extended to more early years settings, and to provide targeted support for transitions from nursery to school.
- Pupils in B&NES attained higher grades than regional and national figures at all stages of education, except at Key Stage 2 (KS2), where attainment remained in line with national averages.
- In the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the percentage of children reaching a good level of development increased to 73%, higher than regional and national averages.
- Key stage 2 performance for all pupils in the combined reading, writing and maths (RWM) was higher this year, rising from 60% to 63%, higher than the southwest average of 60% and in line with the national average of 63%.
- Key stage 4 attainment in grades 9 -5 English and Maths and in Attainment 8, though slightly down from 2023/2024, is once again higher than regional and national averages. This is to be commended.
- Girls performed better in Key Stage 2 than boys and in the KS4 Attainment 8 measure, but for the first time since 18/19, boys did marginally better than girls in KS4 grades 9 -5 English and Maths.
- Attainment in B&NES is lowest in the Black and Other ethnic groups at all stages of education and remains below national levels at KS2 and KS4. In KS2, 53 % of Black pupils achieved the expected standard in RWM, compared to 63% nationally. The gap reduces in KS4, with 39% of black pupils attaining grades 9-5 in english and maths, compared to 43% nationally.
- When in secondary school, our FSM cohort does make much better progress. Whilst outcomes for this group of pupils in KS4 have previously been in line with national outcomes, this year they have fallen slightly below the national average. However, the progress this group makes in our secondary group is significant.

The Consultant in Public Health highlighted the following further areas from the report.

- Addressing the attainment gap is a shared responsibility and B&NES Council has an important role in leading a whole-systems approach to addressing the

attainment gap by addressing the root causes across Council services, coordinating place-based action with partners, and aligning resources.

- Public Health presented a previous report that set out why a whole systems approach to reducing the attainment gap is important and key findings of research undertaken to better understand the drivers – outside of education settings - for the attainment gap in B&NES. Research included exploring the data, published evidence, and conversations with over 60 professionals working with young people in B&NES and young people themselves.
- The research identified ten core drivers outside of education settings that are contributing to the attainment gap.
- A B&NES Council action plan is currently being implemented, which takes action to address the core drivers identified. Actions are led by Heads of Service and action leads across the Council, including in teams within the Place, People and Resources directorates. The Be Well B&NES Steering Group currently monitors progress made against the action plan.
- Public Health developed a business case to recommend investment in key areas that will help to address the education attainment gap. A growth request has subsequently been included in the 2026/27 budget which would enable the recruitment of a post to help drive forward action on education inequalities, funding to sustain and strengthen projects already delivering measurable progress (e.g. action learning sets with education settings and Language for Life), and funding for low cost pilots designed for rapid testing.
- Action on education inequalities needs to take place across the wider system and so working with our system partners is crucial. The Multi Academy Trusts have established a B&NES Disadvantaged Network Group to focus MAT efforts, particularly in relation to early years and transition.
- A Mayor of Bath research residency is also being undertaken with the University of Bath, with two PHD students undertaking a 3-month research project on education attainment inequalities.
- There is clear alignment between a whole systems approach to reducing the attainment gap and the Best Start in Life Strategy, Best Start Family Hubs, the Family First Partnership Programme and wider system work on neighbourhood health and prevention.
- During 2026/27 the focus will be on continuing to implement the B&NES Council Action Plan, maximising use of additional investment, and aligning the capacity of system partners so that we are making best use of our resources to address education inequality collectively. Another event will be held to support the coming together and mobilisation of wider system partners.

Councillor Bharat Pankhania, the current Mayor of Bath, said that he was pleased that the University of Bath had agreed to explore the topic further in an attempt to

find the determinates that will make a difference. He added that he hoped to share further details of the research with the Panel in the future.

Councillor Paul Crossley asked if the figures for trends relating to Black and Other ethnic groups were broken down into further details.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding replied that this information was available from the Strategic Evidence Base (<https://www.bathnes.gov.uk/strategic-evidence-base-education>).

Councillor Joanna Wright commented that she was concerned that the subjects of Art and Music were not being considered as important as they used to be. She added that she believed this was a poverty related issue and that the Council has limited resources to make a change.

The Consultant in Public Health said that they use the resources they do have sensibly and work with their partners, which include WECA and their involvement in the Child Poverty Action Plan.

The Director of Education & Safeguarding added that BANES carries out a lot of positive work with Public Health and uses the levers it has to attempt to influence change. He added that finances remain a challenge to work within.

Councillor Paul May said that he welcomed the research that was taking part in conjunction with the Mayor of Bath, but said that it must be supported by an evidence base.

Councillor Pankhania replied that he acknowledged that the work will need to be evidenced and that the intention is to address the educational experience for all our children. He added that he had discussed with Voices for Life a proposed longitudinal study that would take place over a number of years.

Councillor Eleanor Jackson asked if there were any minority clusters within BANES that need additional support.

The Consultant in Public Health replied that there are steps within the Action Plan to ensure that we are reaching communities appropriately and that some groups were identified in the preparation of the plan.

The Panel **RESOLVED** to note the report.

98 PLACEMENT SUFFICIENCY

The Assistant Director for Children and Young People Services introduced the report to the Panel and highlighted the following areas.

- 228 Children in Care
- Three children are currently in residential care as a result of there being no suitable, available foster placements. The Alternative Care team continue to

actively search for a suitable foster carer for these children and remains a key priority for the team.

- The Sufficiency Programme Board was established in Quarter 3 of 2025/26 to provide governance in addressing four key areas of sufficiency in children's services: fostering, residential children's homes, provision for disabled children and accommodation for young people aged over years.

Fostering

- The project aims to review the existing cohort of children and young people in foster care to understand their needs and their reasons for being in foster care. It will also review existing foster care provision, including geographical location, costs, accessibility, needs it can meet, capacity and availability of carers. Finally, it will look at the current offer to foster carers, how this offer compares across our neighbouring authorities and how this could be maximised to improve recruitment and retention.
- The project will use this analysis to forecast needs for foster care in the future, and will support, if indicated, the delivery of a business case to further support the recruitment of in-house foster carers for looked after children in B&NES. It will also develop a policy, process and business case for housing alterations for foster carers, to increase the number of children and young people they can support.

Residential Children's Home

- This workstream aims to review the existing cohort of children and young people in residential care to understand their needs and their reasons for being in residential care. It will also review the existing residential care provision, including geographical location, costs, accessibility, needs it can meet, capacity and available free capacity.
- The workstream will use this analysis to forecast projected needs for residential care, and will support, if indicated, the delivery of a business case to develop and deliver in-house residential capacity for children in care in B&NES.

Resources for disabled children

- This workstream focuses on ensuring that disabled children and their families have access to appropriate, high-quality short breaks and direct payment support. Local authorities have a statutory duty under the Children Act 1989 and the Breaks for Carers of Disabled Children Regulations (2011) to provide a sufficient short breaks offer for eligible families. A strategic needs assessment will be completed over the next six weeks to set out the current position in B&NES and identify future requirements.

16+ support and care leavers accommodation

- This workstream aims to review the existing cohort of children and young people aged 16 years plus, to understand their needs and equalities profile. It will also review 16+ accommodation provision, including geographical location, costs, accessibility, needs it can meet, capacity and available spaces. The workstream will consider improvements in recruitment and retention of supported lodgings carers. Finally, it will look at the current accommodation offer to young people who are care experienced, working closely with colleagues in Housing.

B&NES is generally providing good-quality care for its looked-after children. Ofsted (June 2025) rated services “Good” across all domains, confirming safe, suitable placements and timely permanence planning. However, the overall cohort continues to grow, with the number of children in care increasing at a slightly faster rate than that of our statistical neighbours. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) make up 10% of the cohort, rising to one third of all care leavers in the post-16 cohort.

There is a strong focus on supporting children in care to return to live with their families when it is safe and appropriate to do so. This process, known as reunification, involves carefully assessing whether a child can move back home and ensuring the right support is in place for both the child and their family. B&NES has an established Reunification Framework, based on National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) guidance.

The Government has set out a national ambition to create 10,000 additional foster homes over the next decade. This is intended to reduce reliance on residential care, improve outcomes for children, and stabilise local authority budgets. The plan forms part of a wider programme of reform to modernise fostering services. As part of this, the government are advocating for a regional delivery model which will provide a shift towards regional delivery of fostering recruitment and assessment.

Regionalisation is part of a longer-term shift toward creating Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs), with the new end-to-end fostering hubs acting as an interim step. While current hubs focus mainly on early recruitment, RCCs will ultimately plan, commission, and deliver a full range of children’s care services, including fostering, residential, and secure care, on behalf of all local authorities in a region. Their purpose is to reduce competition between councils, stabilise the care market, and secure better value for money.

Councillor Paul Crossley asked what work is carried out prior to children returning to their homes following incidents of domestic violence.

The Assistant Director for Children and Young People Services replied that robust tools are used to analyse the level of risk and whether there has been a change in home circumstances / dynamics. She added that risks are assessed on an individual basis and that children would normally return under a care order and retain the support identified within that.

Councillor Crossley asked if the decision is made to develop and operate an in-house children's home that it addresses the specific needs of BANES young people.

Councillor Wright added that it be worth this issue being discussed at a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Group.

The Director of Children's Services & Education replied that the intention is for this matter to be discussed further at a future meeting of the Corporate Parenting Group.

The Panel **RESOLVED** to note the work of the Sufficiency Programme Board.

99 SEND / EHCP UPDATE

The Head of SEND introduced the report to the Panel, she was accompanied by Rachel Hale, Chair and a Director of B&NES Parent Carer Forum.

Councillor Joanna Wright asked what the Council is doing to ensure children and young people are assessed properly when they apply for an EHCP to reduce the number of appeals due to a refusal to assess.

The Head of SEND replied that this is an area that they have been focussing on and that by increasing the quality of needs assessments received, alongside the robust scheme of delegation, has seen a significant decrease in the number of appeals lodged due to refusal to assess across the year.

She added that the assessment process is a difficult thing to get right and that it was a balance of resources and ensuring that you are not disadvantaging young people who need an assessment.

She explained that work was ongoing to promote mediation between the Council and families prior to an appeal being made.

Councillor Wright noted that 11 complaints have already been received across Q1 & Q2 of 2025/26 relating to provision not being delivered. She asked what the reasons for this are and what is the Council doing to resolve this.

The Head of SEND replied that this often due to school avoidance / non-attendance by the young person, normally due to mental health reasons. She added that if this situation should occur it can then take time to transfer the provision from a school setting to home or another location.

Councillor Wright asked what the average delay was in delivering paperwork for an EHCP Annual Review.

The Head of SEND replied that this was slightly tricky to measure and that they have been looking at how data can be improved. She added that every child has a phased transfer review when moving between schools or at key stages, which is every three years, and that is always carried out in time.

Councillor Wright said that she was disappointed to see that work needs to be done to improve adherence to statutory timescales and said that this matter should be additionally highlighted as it is a real factor for the families concerned.

The Head of SEND replied that only 35 plans at present were over 20 weeks out of around 250 and that it was likely that these figures were comparable on a national level. She added that they always intend to finalise plans as quickly as possible.

She said she believed that communications between the Council and families on the timescales of finalising a plan are improving and stressed that it is also important to have a degree of quality to the plan.

Rachel Hale explained that it was the role of the Parent Carer Forum to act as a strategic voice to its 1,700 members and that a great deal of work is ongoing regarding communication from the Council to the public. She added the planned SEND reforms are interesting as they address hearing the voices of all families. She said that in the main most would welcome a good quality, robust plan even if it takes slightly longer than 20 weeks to finalise.

The Panel **RESOLVED** to;

- i) Note the national, regional and local picture regarding the increase in applications for Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNA) and the increase in issued plans.
- ii) Be assured that Local Authority Officers continue to work strategically with social care, health, settings and other partners in order to work within statutory guidelines and support settings in delivering the very best outcomes for our children and young people.
- iii) Note the improving picture within the service regarding statutory compliance.
- iv) Be assured as to the quality of EHC needs assessments and plans, as evidenced by multi agency quality assurance.
- v) Be assured as to the commitment of officers to resolve disputes quickly and without the need for formal appeals process, noting the reduction in appeals for refusal to assess children and young people.

100 PANEL WORKPLAN

The Panel reviewed the workplan, noting items to be brought forward, including:

- Children's Services Sufficiency Programme Update
- Future of BSW Long COVID service
- Connecting Families Update
- DfE Regional Office attendance / MATs performance update

The Panel **RESOLVED** to note their current workplan and these proposals for future updates / reports.

The meeting ended at 1.10 pm

Chair(person)

Date Confirmed and Signed

Prepared by Democratic Services