

Lead Member PDS Report 12/05/2025.

Senior Manager changes in Children's Services.

As you know, we said goodbye to Mary Kearney Knowles at the last panel. She has now retired from her role as the B&NES DCS. The recruitment process for new DCS has been completed and hopefully, by the time the panel meets on the 12th of May 25, I will be able to advise you of the successful candidate.

In the meantime, I am pleased to say that Chris Wilford has been acting as our Interim Director of Children's Services.

Leigh Zywek, our Assistant Director of Children and Young People's Services has been successful in applying for a role in a neighbouring authority. She will leave us in the middle of June. Leigh has been a fantastic leader and we will miss her steady hand. To ensure leadership continuity, we have made an interim appointment. Phoebe Holland, a current Head of Service in B&NES, will act as Assistant Director until 1.4.26. This will allow time for the new DCS to come into post and make the permanent recruitment decisions.

Response to Knife Crime report

As highlighted in my previous report, I am very supportive of the work of the Task Finish Group. We have been asked to respond to the recommendations. I fully accept recommendations 1, 2 and 4. Carla Cooper will provide some additional details for recommendations 3, 5 & 6.

This area of work sits under the violence reduction partnership, cutting across a range of services, including Children's Community Safety. As Lead Member, I will ask for briefings on our activity so that I have the assurance that we are doing all we can to reduce this issue in B&NES. In readiness for this, I have tasked for the report to go to the Violence Reduction Partnership to look at the final two recommendations. I hope to have a response to this for the meeting today

To ensure that I have the right level of assurance of the activity on knife crime prevention, I have asked officers to utilise the time of the BCSSP's Independent Scrutineer to look at the arrangements for tackling knife crime in B&NES. This report will go back to the Executive of the BCSSP, but I will bring any learning back to Policy Development and scrutiny.

Implementation of Families First

As I mentioned in my last briefing, our teams are working to progress Families First and the reforms set out by the government in their 'Keeping Children Safe Helping Families Thrive' guidance.

We are approaching this work through 4 strands of children's services work -

- Family Help
- Multi-Agency Child Protection
- Corporate Parenting
- Parent/Carer Engagement

Managers and Business Change staff are organising meetings to progress all areas of these changes; this will provide clarity around the vision of what this will look like for the children and families in B&NES and a clear timeline for implementation in 2026. This work will be overseen through the children's transformation programme and will include all relevant Council departments and partner agencies to support the necessary changes and commitment to collaborative working. There will also be input from parents/ carers who have received a service from us so that they can help influence service provision.

The Department of Education has provided the local authority with £400K to implement these reforms. This grant will continue, but we believe this falls short of the resources needed to implement all of the changes. We are working collectively in the South West to lobby the DFE for more funding to achieve our aims.

These are significant changes, so I will ensure that I keep briefings on the reforms included in my Lead Member updates.

Corporate Parenting Group meeting held on 5th March 2025.

Due to the previous Corporate Parenting meeting being postponed, the published report on the OFSTED Focused Visit on Care Leavers from 4/5th December was shared at the March meeting. As highlighted in my last update, this was a fabulous OFSTED report, highlighting the excellent work of our children's services teams.

The ICB shared some great news, advising that by April 2025, there would be a dental practice in Bath that would set aside appointments for children and young people looked after who were not registered with an NHS dental practice and needed to be seen by a dentist.

Following the Corporate Parenting meeting, confirmation has been given that WECA is extending, for a further year, the offer of free bus transport for care-experienced young people, which is really positive.

To further develop understanding and support for care experienced people through decision making processes, B&NES Equality Officer is meeting with care experienced young people on 9th May. The aim is to provide guidance on removing barriers, improving care experienced people's lives and practical advice when undertaking equality analysis and documentation through the Equality Impact Assessment process.

Fostering Families

We recently had a visit from the Chief Social Worker, Isabelle Trowler, to discuss our Fostering Families work. Fostering Families is an alternative to foster care, offering families an intensive level of long-term support from a matched carer when the children are at risk of coming into care.

The success of this approach has led to a national webinar being held where other Local Authorities have asked us to support the implementation of Fostering Families within their organisations. This is a significant testament to the incredible work being undertaken by Children's Social Care teams and demonstrates excellent innovative practice.

West of England Music Alliance (WEMA)

Unfortunately, due to the timing of communication and illness in WEMA, I have not had the most recent music service update to share with the panel. However, WEMA is keen to update the panel, and it has committed to sharing its newsletters with panel members. I have asked managers to make the arrangements for all PDS panel members to receive WEMA newsletters.

Early years – Funding Agreement

As you will be aware, some concerns have been raised by some of the early years providers about the Early Years Entitlement (EYE) Provider Agreement. I have provided some context and background to this issue in my report, but an officer from our Early Years funding team will be present to answer any questions.

The Early Years Entitlement (EYE) Provider Agreement, April 1, 2025, is a national policy set by the Department for Education in England. The Childcare Acts of 2006 and 2016 place a number of duties on English Councils regarding early years education and childcare, including the administration of EYE funding and ensuring the sufficiency of provision for families. The EYE offer has expanded since its inception in 1997, with the latest change extending to children as young as 9 months in working families, expanding further to 30 hours from September 2025. Providers may soon receive more than 80% of their income from Department for Education funding at the rate provided to each Council.

The recent update to the EYE agreement clarifies the charges that providers can make on top of EYE funding for items such as meals and trips, stating that these charges should be voluntary and alternatives should be provided if parents cannot pay. This update follows a High Court decision in February 2024, which sided with the Local Government Ombudsman in a case brought against Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole Council regarding nursery fees. On February 21, 2025, the Department for Education published updated regulations for Councils and their providers, effective April 1, 2025, and held a webinar to address Council questions.

Since March 6, the EYE team has been informing providers about the changes through webinars and correspondence. The new Provider Agreement, based on the updated Department for Education template, has been sent to current providers to review and return before the April implementation date. The EYE team has been handling a significant amount of provider correspondence and has received 148 out of 154 agreements to date. Providers must accept the agreement as it stands or not participate in the scheme.

A group of providers has raised concerns regarding the content and timescales of the new agreement, and a national campaign group, Early Years Voice, has been established to raise funds for potential legal action against the Department for Education. Despite these concerns, the agreement aims to ensure that EYE hours are provided free to families at the rate paid by each Council, with voluntary charges for additional items. The Department for Education has been clear that it is supportive of providers providing services such as hot meals and would encourage families to purchase these, but it is clear that the charge cannot be mandatory and a choice must be given to families to provide their own alternative.

Safety Valve

We have recently received correspondence from the Department for Education (DFE) requesting confirmation on whether we wish to amend any of our submitted Safety Valve plans prior to their presentation for ministerial approval. Given the passage of time since the original plans were submitted, our officers have updated the financial and business plans, held further meetings with DFE advisors to review our progress, and finalised the plans, which were submitted on 30th of April, 2025. I will request that officers present an updated report at the next scrutiny panel meeting.

In the meantime, we are continuing to enhance services for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). We are meeting internal budget targets and continuing to improve service delivery. The capital programme, which includes the development of special and alternative provision schools, a residential school, and resource bases, is progressing. However, delays persist in the Free Schools due to the DFE's review of all school capital programmes. I am diligently lobbying the DFE on this matter.

An equality Impact assessment has been completed and is available to view on the council's website: <https://www.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/EQIA-SEND-Safety-Valve.pdf>

This will be reviewed and updated as required before the next scrutiny panel – we welcome any feedback.

Free School Meals Auto Enrolment

We are on track to implement our local Auto Enrolment system, with a go-live date being the start of the next academic year on September 25 being on track.

There have been some delays in developing automated system reports to identify prospective claimants, so we are having to carry out some manual checking, though we expect to be able to automate this shortly. This month, we will start to communicate further with families, preparing the letters and communications to advise families that we consider it likely that they will qualify for FSM, and unless they object, we will auto-enrol their child. We will then start to prepare the formal communications for schools.