

Lead Member PDS Report 15/12/2025.

1. Recruitment to Assistant Director - Children's Social Care

Permanent recruitment is underway to secure a new Assistant Director for Children's Social Care. A selection process is scheduled during December. If successful, we hope the new Assistant Director to be in role by the beginning of the new financial year (April 2026).

2. Education White Paper

The anticipated government Education White Paper, which I noted in my last report, has been delayed. We now expect the paper to be launched in January 2026. More updates will follow as soon as we have more information. We do know that the recent government budget announcements confirmed that the DfE will assume responsibility for all future SEND funding from 2028, representing a significant policy shift. We do not yet have any additional details on what this will mean for Local Authorities, including any information on historic deficits held by councils for high needs budgets. We expect to learn more when the government releases the Education White Paper.

3. Safety Valve

We are still awaiting formal feedback from the Department for Education (DfE) on our most recent Safety Valve submission and continue to follow up actively. The DfE has continued to pause our SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) Free Schools, and we await further clarity on timelines and next steps. We don't expect the future of safety valve funding, free schools or future SEND funding to be addressed until the government launches its Education White Paper in early 2026.

Locally, we are implementing a series of actions to reassure families and demonstrate progress, including clear communication on upcoming changes, preparation for the forthcoming SEND Inspection, sharing our strategic priorities through 'Our Plan for SEND', and promoting the Local Offer to improve visibility and accessibility. These activities are designed to alleviate concerns, build confidence in our SEND system, and reinforce our commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people.

4. SEND Updates

We know that our Local Area will receive its SEND Inspection soon. As highlighted in my previous report, we continue to prepare, with teams across education, health and social care working together to ensure we can demonstrate what is working well across B&NES and what we are improving.

I know the timeliness of EHCPs is a concern; the national average for EHCP assessments completed within 20 weeks was 46% in 2024. We are below this at 29% and we do need to improve. We are committed to supporting families throughout the assessment process. We believe that the quality of the experience while families wait is just as important as the outcome, but we are focused on improving timeliness:

What we are doing:

- **Expanding our teams:** We have recruited and are training more statutory SEND staff and are working with additional Educational Psychologists to help manage the increased demand.
- **Improving our processes:** We are making ongoing improvements to our systems to help assessments run more smoothly and efficiently, including a dedicated phone line to answer parents' calls.
- **Providing interim support:** Our Inclusion and Alternative Provision support service is working hard to support our schools and other settings to meet the needs of all children and young people whilst their needs are assessed.

5. Meetings with Parent Carer Forum

As the lead member for children's services, it is important to me that I engage positively with our B&NES Parent Carer forum. To do this effectively, I recently attended a meeting with Forum representatives and council officers to oversee the development of a memorandum of understanding called The '**Together is Better**' agreement between B&NES Parent Carer Forum CIC (BPCF), Bath & North East Somerset Council (B&NES) Live Well B&NES (LWB) and SENDIAS Bathnes sets out how we can work together to ensure families of children and young people with special educational needs and disability (SEND) benefit from the best support, advice, and meaningful participation opportunities possible.

6. Free School Meals – Auto Enrolment

The Local Authority have successfully implemented our Free School Meals (FSM) Auto-Enrolment system. This welfare team will carry out the auto-enrolment exercise again in spring/early summer 2026. The FSM eligibility criteria widened so that any children in households where the parent receives Universal Credit will be entitled to FSM. This differs from the current system, where anyone who receives UC and has earnings below £7,400 is entitled. Members of this panel have asked for data, by ward, on those families who opted out of the auto-enrolment scheme. Unfortunately, this data has not been retained by the service area.

7. School Streets

As you know, responsibility for School Streets doesn't sit in my portfolio. However, I keep myself updated on these important developments, and I can share with you a report on

School Streets that was presented to the Climate and Sustainability panel on 27th November by Officers. The link to the report is here –

<https://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/documents/s89525/School%20Streets%20Report.pdf>

8. Home to School Transport

Officers presented a report highlighting the council's spending and activity to ensure the council provides effective Home to School Transport to the Corporate Policy Development & Scrutiny Panel on 27th November. A link to the report is included below.

Whilst the Place Directorate monitors delivery and budget management for HTST, I am assured that we are doing all we can to deliver an effective service and continually monitor and implement solutions to manage costs.

<https://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/documents/s89452/HomeSchoolTransport%20Finance%20Report.pdf>

9. Charlton House

As previously shared with this committee, the council is moving forward with plans to repurpose the now-vacant Charlton House site in Keynsham into a new specialist education and care facility. Initially, we planned to deliver this as a residential school; however, through consultation with providers, it has become necessary to deliver this as two projects on one site. One project will deliver a 30-place special school, and a second will deliver two small children's homes on the site. Both will provide dedicated support for young people aged 11–18 with Autism and Social Emotional Mental Health difficulties.

I have submitted an updated Single Member Decision (SMD) to amend the original SMD to reflect the changes we have made to the planned provision outlined in my original SMD in August 2024. I hope this will be approved by the time this committee meets.

We have started the procurement process to appoint the school provider. The Department for Education manages this process and should be concluded by May 2026. Alongside this, a separate procurement process for the children's home providers is underway. This process should be concluded by June 2026, and the council will be the appointee of this provider.

We need to ensure the community is consulted and engaged in this project, so consultation has begun:

- On the 24th November 2025 – the project website and online consultation went live for a period of 4 weeks. <https://www.bathnes.gov.uk/charlton-house-homes-and-special-school>
- 5th December 2025– stakeholder consultation event – in Charlton House
- 12th December 2025– public exhibition (with paper feedback forms)– in Charlton House
- 19th December 2025– consultation draws to a close

The school and residential homes will significantly strengthen local SEND provision – enabling more children to be educated and cared for closer to home rather than in costly out-of-county placements. This project will help improve outcomes for some of the area's most vulnerable young people and reduce the high costs associated with external specialist placements.

We are currently working on the build timescales, and we hope to have an official opening in late 2027. However, this is a complex project, and I will keep this updated on timescales as the project develops.

INTRODUCTION TO KEY AGENDA ITEMS

Families First Programme of Reforms update

I want to introduce this report which Phoebe Holland, acting Assistant Director Children's Social Care) and Paula Sumner, Interim Assistant Director for Children's Transformation, will present today.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill has reached its third reading in the House of Lords and Royal Assent into legislation is awaited.

Further Central Government grant funding (£547m) has been announced to support implementation and embedding of key reforms has been announced over the next three years. In B&NES we await further information regarding what this grant allocation will be for our local authority and conditions attached to this grant.

The current Families First Programme of key reforms requiring development and implementation include:

1. **Multidisciplinary family help services:** these are responsible for supporting families across targeted early help, child in need and child protection, through the provision of a consistent lead practitioner and a team around the family, with the objective of keeping families intact where it is safe to do so.
2. **Multi-agency child protection teams:** these are designed to improve the quality of safeguarding practice by bringing together skilled social workers, police officers, health practitioners and education professionals into single teams, an approach that will be put into law.
3. **Family group decision making meetings:** these involve giving extended families the opportunity to hold meetings and develop plans to safeguard and promote the welfare of children involved with early help or social care; under the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, councils will be required to offer such meetings to families at the pre-proceedings stage, to enable them to develop alternatives to children going into care.

Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report

I want to introduce this annual report, which is being presented by Sarah Hogan, Head of Service for the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service. The statutory work of the Independent Reviewing Service is reported on an annual basis via their annual reporting mechanism. The report presented today reviews 2024-2025.

Independent Reviewing Officers oversee the way in which children in care are supported and cared for. They review the quality of care plans and work to ensure timely, appropriate and good quality care. They raise concerns with key professionals and agencies when they have concerns.

Some key data included in the report:

Number of Children in Care

- **220 children** were in care as of March 2025, a **1.4% increase** from the previous year (217 in 2024).
- The number of children entering and leaving care was closely aligned, indicating stability in the cohort.
- **60 per 10,000 children in care per 10,000** in Bath and North East Somerset, slightly below the national average of 67 per 10,000.

Some profile issues:

- **Age:** 70% (155 children) are over 10 years old; 39% (86 children) aged 10–15, 31% (68 children) aged 16–17.
- **Ethnicity:** 74% White British children, 23% (Black and Brown children from a range of global majority ethnicity backgrounds).