

Information/Discussion Paper

Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 3 March 2026

No Child Left Behind Update

This note contains the information to keep Members informed of matters relating to the work of the Committee, but where no decisions from Members are needed

1. Why has this come to scrutiny?

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the progress of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) programme and outlines priorities for 2026. Key achievements in 2025 include the successful delivery of the Year of Youth Action, major engagement activities such as Party in the Park (attended by over 3,600 people), coordination of the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme, and development of legacy projects including the Youth Activity Pass and Youth Café.
- 1.2 Looking ahead, the report sets out the outline plans for a Year of Action on Education for All commencing September 2026 that will address challenges around school attendance, engagement, and mental health through community-based solutions.

2. Background

2.1 About No Child Left Behind

- 2.2 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was formed in December 2018. The Council is responsible for all aspects of NCLB and currently employs two part-time officers on a fixed term contract to deliver this in consultation with the Cabinet member for safety and communities. Given that NCLB is a collaborative movement, it has established a strategic board (see below) that advises the cabinet member in her decision-making.

2.3 Key Priorities for NCLB

1. To highlight the issue of children growing up in poverty in Cheltenham and the inequality between them and their more affluent peers including:
 - Commissioning research;
 - Engaging and listening to local young people.

2. To address the inequality gap with a programme of events and activities:

- Coordinating the Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) Programme that provides free enriching activities and nutritious meals during school holidays for children on free school meals;
- Large-scale community events including Party in the Park.

3. Be a call to action for all sectors to work together to make transformational change over the longer-term:

- Community agreement in place which 105 organisations have signed;
- Collaborations with local VCS organisation, schools, and community groups;
- Hosting an annual awards and showcase events to celebrate individuals, organisations, and projects that make a positive impact on children and families here in Cheltenham.

2.4 The role of the NCLB strategic board is to:

- Develop a strategic vision for helping children and young people in Cheltenham, which all NCLB members will follow;
- Engage in and create fundraising campaigns, which will help to support relevant events and activities;
- Have oversight of delivery;
- Agree the direction and priorities with the operational sub-groups;
- Monitor and review delivery outcomes, including risks, and advise on delegation of funding for operations.

3. Data and Insights: Understanding Current Needs

3.1 The NCLB Strategic Board reviews data to stay informed on issues affecting children and families and engages directly with young people through the current Year of Action.

3.2 Key insights include:

- **Child poverty:** 15% of children under 16 live in absolute low-income families; eight local areas rank among the 20% most deprived nationally for the proportion of children living in income deprived families.
- **Education:** Children in poverty face higher absence rates and a significant attainment gap of 34% in English and Maths GCSEs between free school meals (FSM) pupils and their peers.
- **Health and wellbeing:** Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) referrals have risen 25% since 2021, with increasing cases of autism, social/emotional needs, and speech/language difficulties. FSM pupils report higher rates of self-harm, eating disorders, and mental health support needs.
- **Safety concerns:** Teenage girls report harassment and fear after dark; FSM pupils are more likely to experience police involvement and gang association.

- **Youth priorities:** Young people want more free/affordable activities, safe evening spaces, jobs, apprenticeships, and inclusive town centre spaces.

3.3 Supporting data is provided in Appendix 1.

4. Key Projects: progress and next steps

4.1 Year of Youth Action

Cabinet endorsed 2025 as a Year of Youth Action to celebrate and mobilise young people's voices, talents, and leadership.

Highlights:

- Youth engagement programme delivered over the year to deepen understanding of issues affecting young people that will be summarised in a report to Cabinet in April 2026;
- Delivery of events including Party in the Park and NCLB Showcase;
- Scoping of the Youth Activity Pass and Youth Café as legacy projects – see below.

Engagement Activities:

- Cheltenham Education Partnership Horizons event;
- The Children's Society Your Voice event;
- Cambray Carnival;
- COP30 School Climate Conference;
- Her Voice: Her Cheltenham survey and focus groups;
- Youth Pass engagement;
- GCC One Plan consultation at Party in the Park.

Next Steps:

- Review Year of Youth Action via Cabinet report in April;
- Sustain and build on engagement initiatives;
- Proposed 2026 focus: *Year of Action on Education for All* to address declining school attendance and engagement.

4.2 Holiday Activities & Food (HAF) / Party in the Park

Achievements:

- NCLB coordinated the delivery of the HAF programme in Spring, Summer, and Winter holidays funded by GCC, including sports, arts, trips, and family activities;
- Party in the Park 2025;
 - Over 3,600 children and young people attended, 955 free meals provided.
 - Inclusive event with 1,600 attendees reporting additional needs.

- Cost: £20k, equating to £5.55 per child including food.

Next Steps:

- GCC launched a HAF procurement (2026–2029) opportunity in January; Cheltenham indicative allocation is £193k (Year 1). CBC has submitted a bid for to be the district lead for Cheltenham that will then coordinate the delivery of HAF in Cheltenham.
- Party in the Park 2026: Scheduled for 5 August; plans include enhanced facilities, healthy food options, and inter-generational activities.

4.3 Youth Activity Pass

Overview:

- UKSPF-funded (£20k) project to develop a digital pass for young people (11–18 years) offering discounted access to events and opportunities.
- Phase 1 (to March 2026): Develop proof-of-concept platform with CyNam, GlosCol, and industry partners; pilot testing planned for Easter holidays.

Future Scope:

- Expand to include skills development, mentoring, work experience, and apprenticeships.

Next Steps:

- Complete platform development and pilot with selected schools in April.

4.4 Youth Café

- £9k OPCC grant secured to pilot a town-centre Youth Café at Smokey Joe's for 6 weeks. Opened successfully on 12 Feb with 22 young people in attendance on the first night and 33 on 19 Feb – proving that there is demand for the cafe.
- The development of the pilot was informed by feedback from young people. The delivery partners are Springbank CIC and The Rock.

Next Steps:

- Monitor pilot delivery of Youth Café to inform the development of a longer-term solution.

4.5 Business Engagement

- Strengthened partnerships with local businesses (e.g. Infrastar, McDonald's Incito, Renishaw, HBD).
- Fundraising group established; LinkedIn page launched December 2025.
- Nine sponsors were confirmed for the NCLB Awards that were held on 5 February 2026.

Next Steps:

- Explore sponsorship and social value opportunities.
- HBD-supported best practice visit to Sheffield (25 March).

- Grow LinkedIn presence and secure further sponsorship.

4.6 GCC One Plan

- NCLB designated as Cheltenham’s Integrated Locality Board for delivery of One Plan priorities.
- £51k commissioning pot launched to address local needs (school attendance, mental health, SEND).

Next Steps:

- Commissioning pot closed to bids on 9 January; 12 bids received which are now being assessed by GCC.

5. The proposed Year of Action – Education For All

The NCLB Strategic Board recognises growing challenges in school attendance and engagement, with many families struggling to access the support needed for children to thrive. While education remains the responsibility of schools and statutory partners, NCLB can play a vital role in mobilising community-based solutions that strengthen learning, wellbeing, and aspiration.

5.1 Purpose:

The Year of Action will shine a light on the scale and complexity of these challenges, raise awareness, and promote collaborative approaches that remove barriers to learning and support children’s overall wellbeing. It will align with schools and GCC’s One Plan as well as engaging with national campaigns for literacy such as the National Year of Reading and online safety initiatives.

NCLB will engage with existing and new partners and communities to deliver the a range of activities. The current thinking is set out below – though this needs to be discussed and signed off by the NCLB Board and CBC Cabinet member.

5.2 Raising awareness and understanding across the community

- Parent Workshops: helping parents understand the education system and strategies to support their children, especially those that have additional needs
- Support workforce development within school and the wider community to better understand issues that can impact engagement with education including children with SEND, trauma, neurodivergence and mental health.
- Promote understanding within the community of the key issues that impact attendance to gain wider support to preventative initiatives

5.3 Supporting children, young people and families

- Support families with their basic needs to remove barriers to education such as help with transport, uniform banks, housing concerns or food poverty.
- Signpost to mental health support that meet the needs of children and young people most at risk of non-attendance.
- Develop peer-support opportunities for children, young people and parents to help build belonging and community.
- Work with children, young people and families to understand the issues that arise during transition from primary to secondary school to develop evidenced-based solutions
- Work with existing community support to ensure it links with schools at an early stage to prevent persistent absence.
- Pair students with mentors from local organisations to build aspiration and belonging.

5.4 Encouraging informal learning and extra-curricular development

- Engage with the National Year of Reading campaign organised by the National Literacy Trust and the Department for Education. Cheltenham Festivals are also engaging with this through the year so there are opportunities for collaboration.
- Facilitate connections between sports, activity, cultural and creative projects and schools and youth work to allow children and young people to develop confidence and skills that help them in their education
- Develop the Youth Café concept to allow young people a place to support practical learning and social skills outside of education settings
- Pilot the Youth Pass to give young people a greater understanding of opportunities that are open to them whilst also creating a sense of belonging and rewarding them for personal development.
- Work with local employers to encourage meaningful work experience for young people especially those at risk of non-attendance.

5.5 Alignment:

This initiative supports GCC's One Plan objectives and contributes to two Children's Coalition priorities:

- Narrowing the attainment gap for children eligible for free school meals.
- Improving school attendance.

6. Next Steps

Members are asked to note the following updates for action during 2026:

- **NCLB Awards**
 - Successfully hosted the No Child Left Behind Awards on 5 February 2026, and will now commence for next year's awards.
- **Holiday Activities and Food Programme**
 - Subject to decision-making by GCC, potentially take on district lead role for Cheltenham to coordinate the delivery of the HAF programme for 2026/27, starting with the delivery of the Spring programme in April 2026.
- **Youth Café Pilot**
 - Monitor the Youth Café pilot that launched on 12 February 2026.
- **Youth Activity Pass**
 - Develop a proof of concept web-based platform for pilot testing with selected schools by end of March 2026.
- **Review of Year of Youth Action**
 - Present a report to Cabinet in April 2026 reviewing the Year of Youth Action and setting out plans to sustain and build on youth engagement initiatives.
- **Party in the Park 2026**
 - Deliver the next Party in the Park event on Wednesday 5 August 2026.
- **Proposed Year of Action on Education for All / Learning for Life**
 - Commence a Year of Action in September 2026 focused on three themes:
 - Awareness and understanding across the community.
 - Support and engagement with children, young people, and families.
 - Informal learning and extracurricular development.
- **Business Engagement**
 - Explore business sponsorship opportunities for NCLB in greater detail, alongside social value initiatives.
- **Governance Models**
 - Officers to review future governance models for NCLB and bring a future paper to Cabinet for consideration.

Background Papers

Contact Officer

**Richard Gibson, Head of communities,
wellbeing & communities**

**Tracy Brown, Safeguarding & partnerships
manager**

Accountability

**Cllr Victoria Atherstone, Cabinet Member
Safety and Communities**

Appendix 1 – Data and Insights

Wider context

The borough contains two Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) that fall into the most deprived 10% nationally (parts of Hesters Way and St. Pauls). These areas have long been associated with higher deprivation levels.

The IoD 2025 measures seven domains:

- Income & Employment: Hesters Way and Springbank show high levels of income and employment deprivation.
- Education, Skills & Training: St Paul's and St Peter's score poorly, indicating challenges in educational attainment.
- Health & Disability: Some areas in west Cheltenham have above-average health deprivation.
- Crime: Urban wards like St Paul's and parts of Lansdown show higher crime-related deprivation.
- Barriers to Housing & Services: Cheltenham is okay with this domain, but affordability remains an issue in some areas.

The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) measures the proportion of all children aged 0 to 15 living in income deprived families. Cheltenham 8 areas that are ranked in the most deprived 20% nationally for this indicator. These areas are:

- Hesters Way 1
- Hesters Way 2
- Hesters Way 3
- Oakley 2
- Oakley 3
- St Mark's 1
- St Paul's 2 (ranked 946 out of 32,844 LSOAs ie top 3% most deprived nationally and second top in the County) This puts this part of Cheltenham in a similar bracket to parts of Blackpool, Sheffield and Birmingham.
- Swindon Village 2

LSOA ref	IDACI national rank
St PAUL'S 2	946
HESTERS WAY 3	1,304
OAKLEY 2	4,334
SWINDON VILLAGE 2	4,628
HESTERS WAY 2	4,755
St MARK'S 1	4,804
HESTERS WAY 1	5,604
OAKLEY 3	6,012

Cheltenham children's needs analysis – October 2025

- 15% of children under 16 are living in absolute low-income families (households whose income falls below a fixed threshold that represents the minimum needed to maintain a basic standard of living), with this rate increasing post-pandemic.
- Single parent households on Universal Credit have increased significantly since 2021, indicating growing financial vulnerability.
- 40.5% of children known to social care receive Free School Meals (FSM).
- There has been a significant net increase (c.25%) in referrals to the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service between 21/22 and 24/25 with the greatest increase in referrals of 5-11 year olds.
- There has been a significant increase in the rates of children with autism spectrum disorder, social, emotional and mental health needs and speech, language and communication needs.
- There is a significant attainment gap of 34% between FSM pupils and the overall cohort in English and Maths GCSEs (FSM 22.2% vs overall 56.5%)
- Percentage of school population that have an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) in Cheltenham is 5.59 slightly higher than Gloucestershire which is 5.12%, however the percentage receiving SEN support is 14.21% which is lower than Gloucestershire's overall percentage of 15.8%
- Fixed term exclusion rates per 1,00 for pupil with no SEN support are 51.3, but rise to 334.6 for those with SEN support and 235.1 for those with an EHCP
- Permanent exclusion rates per 1,000 for pupils without SEN support are 0.2 again rising significantly to 9.0 for those with SEN support and 5.1 for those with an EHCP.

Cheltenham school leaders have told NCLB that local data closely aligns to the national picture. National data shows that attendance declines steadily across secondary school, from around 93.5% in Year 7 to 91.0% in Year 11, while persistent absence rises from 21% to 26% over the same period.

This pattern coincides with a marked drop in pupil engagement and satisfaction after transition: enjoyment scores fall from 6.0 in Year 6 to 3.8 in Year 7, and continue to decline through Year 8 and 9, with feelings of safety and belonging also reducing significantly. By Year 10 and 11, engagement stabilizes but remains well below primary levels, and motivation to learn is a concern for nearly a third of pupils.

These trends highlight a strong link between declining engagement and worsening attendance, particularly for vulnerable groups such as pupils with SEND or those eligible for Free School Meals, and underline the need for support for children and families during the transition from year 6 to year 7 and then in the early years of secondary school to stop disengagement.

Pupil Wellbeing Survey -July 2025

- Pupils eligible for FSM were significantly more likely to report missing 10% or more of school sessions in the previous term (40.5%) compared to those not eligible (27.2%) in Cheltenham.
- Pupils eligible for FSM were more likely to report being in trouble with the Police (5% vs. 2%); more likely to report carrying a weapon (4.7% vs. 2.7%) and joining a gang (0.9% vs. 0.3%).
- Pupils eligible for FSM (10.3%) were almost twice as likely to report they were receiving professional mental health support at the time of the survey than non-eligible pupils (6.1%)

- Almost 1 in 3 pupils in secondary and post-16 settings eligible for FSM report ever self-harming compared to 1 in 5 of their less vulnerable peers. They were also significantly more likely to report having an eating disorder (17.4% vs. 8.8%)
- 78.5% of pupils eligible for FSM reported the food available at home enabled them to eat healthily, this was significantly lower than those not eligible (86.2%).

Engagement findings

At a recent youth voice engagement event held in June this year, young people told us that they wanted:

- More free and affordable activities in town for young people
- More jobs for young people
- More apprenticeships opportunities
- More places to go, instead of hanging out in the town centre
- More disabled and neurodiverse youth clubs-important for everyone to feel included
- More low-cost spaces for teenagers
- More evening safe spaces after 5:30pm in town centre

NCLB has also worked with teenage girls at risk of exploitation through Pittville School, All Saints Academy, The Children's Society and Youth justice team to gather their experiences of living in Cheltenham.

Key issues raised include:

Harassment and personal safety concerns:

- Catcalling, being followed and inappropriate touching
- After-dark, in parks, during raceweek

Barriers to seeking help:

- Judgement and stigma
- Professionals' responses and lack of trust
- Complexity of services

Challenges teenage girls face in the town:

- Exposure to violence and fighting
- Emotional and social pressures
- Pressure to try drugs and alcohol