

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Committee**
held on Monday, 16th January, 2023 in the Committee Suite 1,2 & 3,
Westfields, Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

PRESENT

Councillor K Flavell (Chair)
Councillor C Bulman (Vice-Chair)

Councillors L Anderson, M Beanland, J Buckley, S Handley, I Macfarlane,
J Saunders, L Smetham, J Rhodes, J Clowes and K Parkinson

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

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61 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

The Chair referred to the recent sad death of Councillor Stephen Carter. There was a minute's silent reflection in tribute.

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Addison, Cllr Gregory, Cllr Hayes and Cllr Smith. Cllr Clowes, Cllr Parkinson and Cllr Rhodes attended as substitutes.

Cheshire Police had been invited to attend the meeting for the Joint Targeted Area Inspection report but had sent apologies.

62 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

63 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 November 2022 be agreed as a correct record.

64 PUBLIC SPEAKING/OPEN SESSION

There were no public speakers.

65 UPDATE ON PROGRESS AGAINST THE JOINT TARGETED AREA INSPECTION ACTION PLAN

The committee received the report which provided an update on the partnership progress against the action plan from the joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) of

the multi-agency response to the criminal exploitation of children in Cheshire East.

A query was raised as to concerns young people may have about confidentiality when they access NHS services, particularly around whether their parents or carers may be informed. The committee were advised that the NHS has strong rules around confidentiality and follows Gillick competency guidelines but that the partnership would take this away to consider whether it is being communicated clearly to young people, for example through schools.

A further query was raised as to whether more education is needed, both for school pupils and the public, on recognising and understanding signs of exploitation. It was noted that the inspection had found the Safeguarding Children in Education team was particularly strong from a single agency perspective but that the improvement would come from a multi-agency approach and this would be the next step. Officers welcomed the feedback from committee and would take this away for further consideration.

A concern was raised about settings for excluded pupils and the impact this may have. Assurances were given that the majority of excluded pupils were supported through Oakfield Lodge or the Cornerstone Academy which had excellent facilities but that the Director of Education would be keen to hear if there were some exceptions and would pick this up following the meeting.

The Chair passed on the committee's thanks for this work.

RESOLVED (unanimously):

That:

1. The Children and Families Committee consider the Action Plan appended (appendix 1) to this report and scrutinise the progress to date against the JTAI recommendations.
2. The committee agree to receive six-monthly reports on progress against this action plan.

66 MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2023-27 CONSULTATION

The committee received the report which aimed to capture committee members' feedback as consultees on the development of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2023 – 27 in relation to the responsibilities of the committee.

The following comments were put forward:

- Cllr Anderson queried the increase in cost of transport and requested a breakdown of where the additional costs are coming from. The Director of Education responded that the majority of the cost is the increase of children eligible for transport as well as the increase of cost due to procurement. A report brought to committee previously had set out in detail the strategy to review the programme but it was likely to be the next contract year when the benefit of that would be seen. The committee were advised that a small amount of that money would fund the additional capacity needed to deliver the change and that providing school transport

for eligible children was a statutory requirement. The data requested would be extracted from the previous report and re-circulated to committee.

- Cllr Parkinson, who was present as a substitute, asked for clarity on the amount received from government grants in Children's Services and where these funds had been distributed. The Director of Strong Start, Family Help and Integration responded that there was regular reporting to committee on funding received from grants and that a full breakdown of this could be shared following the meeting.
- Cllr Beanland raised a query regarding what the resettlement fund is and whether there was any money left from that fund. The committee were advised that Cheshire East had received this funding for families coming to Cheshire East and that it applied to any services where cost was incurred, for example for transport or additional staffing costs. There was an ongoing piece of work to assign the income to services.
- Cllr Beanland raised a query regarding the £45.6m deficit on the DSG reserve and how it was being managed. The committee were advised that this was being managed by statutory override and that a piece of work was ongoing. The Chair highlighted that high needs did not sit within the MTFS but was part of a high needs management strategy and an update on this would be coming to committee for debate.
- Cllr Beanland raised a query regarding appendix 1 which referred to any betterment to the forecast outturn position being utilised to replenish reserves in line with the priorities of the Corporate Plan, and asked whether there was a figure available for the reserves. The committee were advised that it was necessary to wait for the year end to understand the position on this.
- Cllr Beanland raised a query relating to the £76m referred to in appendix 2 with regard to the DSG budget, specifically what the breakdown of this was and what control there was for how this was to be spent. The committee were advised that a breakdown of this would be brought to the February committee meeting and any outstanding questions could be addressed at that point.
- Cllr Beanland referred to the table on policy proposals in appendix 2 and requested that future reports include a column showing what the original budget was for clarity. The committee were advised that this was included in the full MTFS budget consultation document.
- Cllr Beanland referred to the Educational Psychology service and queried whether this has brought in any income. The committee were advised that this had been included in the MTFS within the general income. The Educational Psychology service had brought in income with the traded service and there was good uptake of intervention work, however statutory work had also increased. A report was due to come to committee with an update.
- Cllr Beanland raised a query regarding the review of the Children's Services structure and how the £0.950m referred to would be achieved.

The Executive Director of Children's Services responded that this was an opportunity to streamline and deliver services differently for less with a plan for the longer term. There were a number of existing and emerging priorities that needed to be delivered in the most efficient and effective way.

- Cllr Beanland made a request for the wording to be changed regarding Crewe Youth Zone to clarify that this was for the benefit of children and young people in Crewe. The Chair expressed a view that it was not necessary to change this as the clarification was not needed.
- Cllr Beanland raised a query regarding the Poynton planning area referred to in appendix 3 and what the £1.5m was for. The committee were advised that a slight shortfall in places at the primary phase was forecast and consultation with the schools was currently taking place. This was always the first stage in considering options and at the appropriate time a paper would be brought to committee for decision.
- Cllr Beanland stated that the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) appeared to be the same each year and queried whether it was expected to change. The committee were advised that there could be an increase but at this point it would be difficult to say what this would be. Further information would be coming to the next committee meeting.
- Cllr Saunders stated that she disagreed with points 35 (integrated children's service strategy) and 40 (early help redesign). Cllr Saunders disagreed with cuts to staffing levels in social services due to families facing profound difficulties at the current time.
- Cllr Saunders also expressed concerns about the impact of staffing cuts on the morale of existing staff and the chances of recruiting staff.
- Cllr Saunders agreed with point 29 regarding the reversal of travel savings that cannot be achieved.
- Cllr Saunders also expressed a view that an audit of buildings should take place with a view to selling buildings that were not needed.
- Cllr Saunders expressed a concern about the early help budget being used to support Crewe Youth Zone. Cllr Saunders stated that she was not against the youth zone but could not see how it could be afforded at the current time and did not feel that it was right to take money from the early help service to help to fund it. Cllr Flavell responded that the function of the youth zone was to provide early help and support and therefore it was not about cutting early help services but investing in something that will provide this service. Cllr Saunders added that the grant could have been used across the whole borough instead of focusing on one area.
- Cllr Clowes raised a query regarding school transport pressures and whether flexibility is being built into contracts for downward changes, for example petrol price decreases. The Director of Education advised that through Procurement there was a lot of challenge going on to look at reducing the contract prices but it remained a challenge.

- Cllr Clowes raised a query regarding safe walking routes to school and whether there had been any progress with this to reduce costs. The committee were advised that this was included in the transport review report.
- Cllr Clowes referred to pressures in social care payments and was surprised that it indicated a budget pressure as in Adults Services direct payments had caused some pressures to decrease. Cllr Clowes suggested this could also be a good thing to encourage to ease the transition from Children's Services into Adults.
- Cllr Clowes referred to the growth in children's social care and acknowledged that pressures are growing but that the budget in 2020 had provided for using Mount View and Bexton Court for provision and would have started to make cost benefits to the services involved within a five year period. Cllr Clowes stated that the business cases would need to be reviewed but with the cost of care going up, it would be expected that there would still be savings and suggested that this is looked into. The Director of Children's Social Care responded that half of the growth related to the need to realign the way DSG was applied and half was in relation to the growth pressures. A greater proportion of children and families had been accessing direct payments. There was an increasing number of children who were being supported by the local offer for children with disabilities and a reduction of children open to the Child in Need & Child Protection service and the Cared for Children with Disabilities service so the broader picture was of prevention and inclusion. The growth pressures in children's social care was around external placement costs. The service had been able to safely reduce the number of children living in residential care over the past 12-18 months. The inflationary costs of the external services had created the additional pressure. There were capital programmes for the refurbishment or purchasing of up to four residential children's homes and a paper on this would be coming to committee in March.
- Cllr Clowes referred to MARS and stated that she did not disagree with reviewing the structure but that MARS had previously not done as well as hoped. Consequently, money from predicted savings had to be put back in. Cllr Clowes suggested, in the light of new regulatory frameworks, the possibility of retraining staff before looking at MARS.
- Cllr Rhodes referred to the DSG and stated that Cheshire East was underfunded and children in Cheshire East were receiving less from the government than those in other areas.
- Cllr Rhodes agreed with Cllr Saunders and Cllr Clowes regarding concerns about the reorganisation of Children's Services.
- Cllr Rhodes also agreed that the MARS scheme had not always been as successful as hoped.
- Cllr Rhodes expressed a concern about cuts to early years as providing support early could reduce costs later on.

- Cllr Rhodes expressed a concern about school transport and getting value for money.
- Cllr Rhodes was in support of the Crewe Youth Zone and stated that Crewe had six wards in the top 10% of deprivation in the country and that the government had recognised this deprivation and awarded the funding for the project.
- Cllr Handley was also in support of Crewe Youth Zone and stated that the cost of living crisis had disproportionately affected children and young people in this area.
- Cllr Flavell recognised that there were external pressures that needed to be addressed and was in support of the way in which officers had managed this.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Children and Families Committee notes:
 - 1.1 The year-end forecast outturn position for 2022/23 (**Appendix 1**).
 - 1.2 The financial context and proposals contained within the Executive Summary of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (**MTFS report Annex C, Section 1**).
 - 1.3 Revenue Grant Funding (Appendix 4).
 - 1.4 Earmarked Reserves (**Appendix 5**).
2. That the Committee provides feedback on the proposals within the MTFS, as related to the Committee's responsibilities, that can support and advise Full Council in fulfilling its responsibilities to approve a balanced budget for 2023/24, in the following areas:
 - 2.1 Revenue Proposals (Details are at **Appendix 2**).
 - 2.2 Capital Programme (**Appendix 3**).

67 SCHOOL ORGANISATION - FUNDING REVIEW FOR SPRINGFIELD SCHOOL: DEAN ROW SITE

The committee received the report which provided information regarding the need for the council to increase the funding envelope for the new Springfield Special School satellite site at Dean Row in Handforth following detailed assessment of the required works from £3m to £6.1m.

The committee recognised and supported the need to increase provision, however concerns were raised about the increase in costs and the time delay. The Chair highlighted that, despite the increase, the savings that would be made on placements was still expected to be greater than the cost. Officers gave assurances that a review had taken place with a report produced on lessons learned and it was requested that this be shared with the committee.

RESOLVED:

That the Children and Families Committee:

1. Note the requirement to increase the cost of the build for the delivery of additional SEN places at Springfield School, Dean Row, Handforth to £6.1 m.
2. Note that the Executive Director of Children's Services has completed the necessary documentation for the virement of this additional funding for this scheme and the awarding of the contract to build.

The committee adjourned for a short break.

68 SCHOOL ORGANISATION - NEW DFE SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS FREE SCHOOL APPLICATIONS

The committee received the report on the submitted application to expand the number of in borough special educational needs free schools through engagement with the Department for Education programme.

There was a requirement at this stage to give confirmation to the Department for Education that costs would be covered in order for the application to progress. However, assurances were given to committee that if the costs became excessive or onerous a further report would be brought back for debate and the option to withdraw.

RESOLVED (by majority):

That the Children and Families Committee:

1. Note the submission of two applications for SEN Free Schools. If successful, these new resources would provide a key mitigation within the SEN High needs management plan.
2. Agree to provide indemnity if one or both schemes are successful. Indemnity would need to be provided relating to any 'abnormal site development' costs. Such a task is part of any new school development site and the initial analysis of the two site is that there are low levels of risk.
3. Note that if successful, these schools would progress through the free school presumption route and appropriate reports would be provided to committee as projects progress to seek relevant delegated approvals.

69 SCHOOL ORGANISATION: PROPOSED REDUCTION IN SEN RESOURCE PROVISIONS AT MIDDLEWICH PRIMARY SCHOOL, MIDDLEWICH AND LINDOW COMMUNITY PRIMARY SCHOOL, WILMSLOW

The committee received the report which sought approval for the proposed reduction in special educational needs resource provision places for learners with a hearing impairment at Middlewich Primary School from 10 to 5 places and at Lindow Community Primary School from 12 to 6 places.

RESOLVED (unanimously):

That the Children and Families Committee give approval:

1. To reduce the number of specialist SEN places in the hearing impairment resource provision at Middlewich Primary School from 10 to 5 with effect from April 2023, having given due consideration to the responses to the statutory public notice and consultation process as per DfE statutory guidance.
2. To reduce the number of places in the hearing impairment resource provision at Lindow Community Primary School from 12 to 6 with effect from April 2023, having given due consideration to the responses to the statutory public notice and consultation process as per DfE statutory guidance.

70 SCHOOL ORGANISATION: THE DINGLE PRIMARY SCHOOL, HASLINGTON: AUTHORITY TO ENTER INTO A CONSTRUCTION CONTRACT INCLUSIVE OF PRE-CONSTRUCTION SERVICES

The committee received the report which sought authority to progress the proposed expansion of the Dingle Primary School into the final stages of design and construction.

It was noted that the latest cost estimate was from July 2022 and there was a query as to whether this will have changed. A further query was raised as to whether the £1m outlined in section 8.2.3 was additional to the latest cost estimate of £1.217m or in lieu of Section 106 contributions. Officers undertook to provide a written response to address these queries, confirming the current cost estimate and a breakdown.

RESOLVED (by majority):

That the Children and Families Committee delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children's Services to procure and award a construction contract for the expansion of The Dingle primary school to 2FE, inclusive of preconstruction services and any other agreements associated with or ancillary to the contract.

71 PROPOSED CHANGE IN AGE RANGE AT PEBBLE BROOK PRIMARY SCHOOL AND UNDERWOOD WEST ACADEMY

The committee received the report on the proposed change in age range at Pebble Brook Primary School and Underwood West Academy.

RESOLVED (unanimously):

That the Children and Families Committee:

1. Consider the consultation responses received to the change of age range at Pebble Brook Primary School.

2. Approve the proposed change of age range at Pebble Brook Primary School, Crewe, from 4 -11 to 2-11 to accommodate a nursery provision for implementation in February or March 2023 as a temporary change for a period of up to two years.
3. Note that the Regional Director for Education will move to extend the age range of Underwood West Academy, Crewe.

72 CHILDREN AND FAMILIES Q2 SCORECARD 2022-23

The committee received the report which provided an overview of performance against the core indicator set within the three directorate areas of Children's Services.

A query was raised as to the percentage of EHCPs issued within timescales as, while the figure was coming down from previous reports, it still appeared to be high. It was noted that timeliness had improved but that the figures were still impacted by a number of factors, including cases which had gone to tribunals. A suggestion was made for the scorecard to include an additional line to show the percentage of new plans completed on time to give a clearer indication of how the service was working.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

73 SCHOOL ORGANISATION: ACADEMISATION OF SCHOOLS: FORWARD PLAN

The committee received the report which informed of planned schools across the borough which were seeking to move to academy status and join a multi academy trust.

RESOLVED:

That the committee receives and notes the summary table (Appendix 1) showing the status of academy conversions across Cheshire East schools.

74 WORK PROGRAMME

The committee considered the work programme. It was noted that the March meeting would be the last meeting before the May elections and a request was made for an update on the Delivering Better Value programme. A further request was made for the committee to receive the lessons learned report and action plan relating to Springfield School, with a further update in May.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted.

The meeting commenced at Time Not Specified and concluded at Time Not Specified

Councillor K Flavell (Chair)