

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Committee**
held on Monday, 13th January, 2025 in the The Capesthorne Room - Town
Hall, Macclesfield SK10 1EA

PRESENT

Councillor C Bulman (Chair)
Councillor E Gilman (Vice-Chair)

Councillors M Beanland, S Bennett-Wake, J Bird, N Cook, L Crane, G Hayes,
B Posnett, B Puddicombe, G Smith, C O'Leary and L Wardlaw

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Theresa Leavy, Interim Executive Director Children's Services
Gill Betton, Head of Service, Children's Development and Partnerships
Claire Williamson, Director of Education, Strong Start, and Integration
Lisa Davies, Interim Improvement Director Children's Services
Richard Nash, Interim Director of Family Help and Children's Social Care
Lauren Conway, Business Manager
Alex Cooper, Project Manager – Education
Nikki Wood-Hill, Finance Manager
Jennie Summers, Acting Head of Legal Services
Karen Shuker, Democratic Services Officer

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

Mike Pearson, Edge Consultants

64 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Bailey and J Saunders.

Councillors C O'Leary and L Wardlaw attended as substitutes.

65 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In relation to item 7 (Improvement Plan Progress Update), Councillor O'Leary declared that in his day job he conducted research around children and young people leaving care.

Councillor Bennett-Wake declared that she worked in a local school and another school in her ward was mentioned in the agenda.

66 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 November 2024 be agreed as a correct record.

67 PUBLIC SPEAKING/OPEN SESSION

There were no public speakers.

68 THIRD FINANCIAL REVIEW 24/25

The Committee considered a report which provided the forecast outturn for the financial year 2024/25 based on income, expenditure, and known commitments as at the end of October 2024. It also identified actions that were being taken to address adverse variances to urgently address the Council's financial sustainability.

Although the position for Children and Families remained unchanged with a forecast overspend of £5.4m there had been increases in the social care area which was offset by reductions in other areas such as school catering.

The DSG (Dedicated Schools Grant) deficit was in the region of £116m for the end of 2024/25.

Whilst the report provided the forecast outturn for all services, members were asked to focus their scrutiny on the forecasts and supporting information relating to services within the remit of the Committee whilst understanding the overall context as a whole.

In response to members comments and questions officers reported that

- A request for information on the original MTFS plan for capital items to be included in reporting of the current forecasts would be fed back to the central finance team.
- a written response would be provided to questions raised in relation to the capital programme, specifically around Tytherington High School, Poynton High School, and the new secondary school in Macclesfield.
- Information on the details of the budget and spend on the ILACS funding to be included in future ILACS reports to Committee.
- They would provide information on the involvement and approval of DfE advisors in the production and monitoring of the DSG management plan, to provide reassurance that the plan delivers Value for Money (VFM).

RESOLVED:

The Children and Families Committee

1. Reviewed the factors leading to a forecast adverse Net Revenue financial pressure of £18.3m against a revised budget of £390.5m (4.7%), scrutinised the contents of Annex 1, Section 2 of the report and reviewed progress on the delivery of the MTFS approved budget policy change items, the RAG ratings and latest forecasts, and understood the actions to be taken to address any adverse variances from the approved budget.
2. Reviewed the in-year forecast capital spending of £144.7m against an approved MTFS budget of £215.8m, due to slippage that has been re-profiled into future years.
3. Noted the available reserves position as per Annex 1, Section 5 of the report.
4. Noted the Capital Virements above £500,000 up to and including £5,000,000 as per Annex 1, Section 4, Table 4 of the report would be approved in accordance with the Council's Constitution.

69 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY CONSULTATION 2025/26 - 2028/29 PROVISIONAL SETTLEMENT UPDATE (CHILDREN & FAMILIES COMMITTEE)

The Committee received a report which sought feedback on the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for 2025/26 – 2028/29 for Corporate Policy Committee to consider on the 6 February 2025 ahead of the final approval of the 2025/26 budget at full Council on 26 February 2025.

The Committee provided scrutiny and comments in relation to

- Whether a reduction in pension cost contributions was realistic given that the local government pension scheme was re-evaluated every April and typically should keep line with the Consumer Price index (CPI).
- Why the 3% levy on traded services was being reversed.
- Concerns in respect of whether the funding staffing establishment model was sustainable as although investment would be increased next year, this would then be reduced over the following two years.
- Concerns around the proposed savings in service quality, particularly in the accommodation support offer for 16-25 young people.
- How did Cheshire East compare with other local authorities in terms of its spend per capita on children's services.
- Welcomed the efforts being made in terms of recruitment and wrap around support to retain staff.
- Assurance sought around the tracking and visits for asylum seeking children post covid.

In response to a question raised in respect of the Youth Justice service contributions nearly doubling, officers stated that there was a split between the Youth Justice Service and safeguarding and that more details on the split would be provided in a written response.

RESOLVED (By Majority)

The Children and Families Committee

(a) Recommend to the Corporate Policy Committee, for their meeting on 6 February 2025, all proposals within Appendix A of the report, as related to the Committee's responsibilities, for inclusion on the Council's budget for 2025/26.

(b) Identify any further budget change proposals, as related to the Committee's responsibilities, that could assist Corporate Policy Committee in presenting an overall balanced budget to Council for 2025/26.

(c) Note the capital growth items listed in Appendix B and the revenue implications noted in paragraph 23 of the report.

(d) Note the contents of Appendix C of the report – Provisional Local Government Settlement 2025/26 (Finance Sub Committee).

(e) Note the contents of Appendix D of the report – Council Tax benchmarking and scenarios (Finance Sub Committee) and consider what the impact of any requests for a change of Council Tax policy would be.

70 IMPROVEMENT PLAN PROGRESS UPDATE

The committee received the report which provided an update on progress against the Children's Services improvement plan to address the findings from the Ofsted inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) conducted in February and March 2024.

The update included:

- Confirmation that the monitoring visit from Ofsted which was due to take place in December 2024 would now take place in February 2025.
- The new governance arrangements had now been implemented which would support oversight of the improvement plan.
- Workstream groups had been set up which would cover the areas of the improvement plan and progress the work and would report into the Oversight Group.
- A Partnership Oversight Group had been introduced to provide scrutiny and challenge around the progress of the improvement plan.

- A new QA officer position had been recruited to and they would undertake quality assurance activity against areas of the improvement plan to evaluate impact.
- Recruitment was underway to recruit to other posts.
- Following a pause in some of the external support to enable a review of what work was required, discussions were taking place with the DfE to establish how additional sector led improvement (SLIP) support could be commissioned.
- Dorset Council had provided an external and independent evaluation of the front door service which had helped identify areas of strength as well as areas for development.
- A new need to know process had been put in place to ensure senior leaders were sighted on the key issues and challenges.
- A new Performance framework had been developed which allowed much closer attention to be paid to the key performance indicators.
- Twenty-six actions were now linked to collaboration with young people and children.
- There was more to do to build on consistency around case recordings.
- A Family Feedback Strategy had been developed to help strengthen questions to obtain clear themes.

Officers provided assurance that by ensuring permanent recruitment, having the right management in place and managing unregistered placements effectively would help with staying within budget, even with the delay of the Ofsted visit.

Following a question in relation to costs of the plan, officers agreed to bring a report to Committee on spend to date.

RESOLVED:

That the Children and Families Committee note the progress against the improvement plan.

The Committee adjourned for a short break.

Councillor G Hayes left after consideration of this item and did not return.

71 UPDATE ON THE PROGRESS OF THE KEY AREAS OF THE DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT MANAGEMENT PLAN 2024/25 TO 2030/31 - FINANCIAL REPORTING 3 2024/2025

The Committee received a report which provided an up-to-date forecast deficit reserve position for 2024-25 on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) management plan. The forecast deficit reserve position within the report was based on actual costs and information taken from 1 April 2024 – 30 November 2024.

The Government had announced funding increases for DSG allocations and had released provisional DSG allocations for 2025-26. The provisional

high needs allocation represented a 7% increase for Cheshire East. This was approximately £4m additional funding compared with 2024-25 allocations.

Officers agreed to provide a written response to a request for a breakdown of the data in respect of Special Independent Schools and Special Schools

RESOLVED:

That the Children and Families Committee:

1. Note the forecast deficit reserve position for 2024-25 for the DSG Management plan 2024/25 to 2030/31.
2. Note the provisional High Needs allocations for 2025/26.

72 UPDATE ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF TRAVEL SUPPORT

The Committee received a report which provided an overview of progress and impact to date against the plans to transform travel support for children and young people in Cheshire East.

In 2022 Cheshire East Council embarked on a three-year change programme to improve and modernise travel support for children and young people across the borough. Edge Public Solutions (Edge) were appointed to support these transformation plans.

Although there had been an increase in appeals this was expected to decrease as policies and procedures were embedded. Officers were using the feedback they were receiving from families to build a picture of their expectations and to help develop policies.

In relation to concerns raised in respect of taxi licensing of vehicles from other authorities and consistency in safety standards, officers agreed to take the concerns back to licensing and a written response would be provided.

RESOLVED:

The Children and Families committee

1. Scrutinise the progress and impact to date in relation to the transformation of travel support for children and young people.

73 WORK PROGRAMME

The committee considered the work programme.

It was agreed that for the February meeting a more detailed financial breakdown would be included in respect of the ILACS funding and would form part of the Improvement Plan update.

An update from the ILACS visit would be included in the Improvement Plan update in the April meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted.

74 MINUTES OF SUB-COMMITTEES

The committee received the minutes of the Cared for Children and Care Leavers Committee meeting held on 18 June 2024 and 30 September 2024

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be noted.

The meeting commenced at 2.00 pm and concluded at 4.25 pm

Councillor C Bulman (Chair)