

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Committee**
held on Monday, 15th September, 2025 in the The Capesthorpe Room - Town
Hall, Macclesfield, SK10 1EA

PRESENT

Councillor L Crane (Chair)

Councillors M Beanland, S Bennett-Wake, S Gardiner, M Goldsmith,
S Holland, B Posnett, B Puddicombe, J Saunders, G Smith, B Wye and
D Edwardes

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Martyn Baggaley, Head of Integrated Commissioning
Sarah Clough, Primary Inclusion Co-Ordinator
Alex Cooper, Project Manager, SEND Transformation Team
Rhiannon Edwards, Domestic Abuse Development Advisor
Danielle Holdcroft, Head of Service - Early Years, Family Help and Prevention
Sarah Lomas, School Organisation and Capital Project Co-Ordinator
Kerry Madden, Families First Programme Director
Joanne Prophet, School Organisation and Capital Manager
Dawn Godfrey Executive Director of Children and Families
Nikki Wood-Hill, Finance Manager
Diane Green, Finance Manager
Karen Shepherd - Family Help Front Door and Supporting Families Lead
Karen Shuker, Democratic Services Officer
Tracy Stephen, Director of Family Help and Children's Social Care
Jennie Summers, Head of Legal Services
Caroline Tote, Interim Director of Commissioning, Quality Assurance and
Partnerships

18 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Bailey, E Gilman,
G Hayes and R Moreton.

Councillors S Holland, D Edwardes and S Gardiner attended as
substitutes.

19 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

During consideration of item 6 - Supported Accommodation for 16–25-
year-old Children in Care and Care Leavers in the interest of openness,
Councillor S Gardiner declared an interest by virtue of the fact his husband
was a partner in a law firm who occasionally represented cared-for
children living within Cheshire East. The firm represented the children
(very occasionally parents) in care-proceedings in which the Council was a

party but there was no direct commissioning or procurement by CEC of his company's services.

During consideration of item 13 – Approval to progress with the proposal for the provision of a new Primary School at Basford East, Shavington, in the interest of openness, Councillor B Wye declared an interest as he lived in one of the wards which was affected by the proposal.

20 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9 June 2025 be agreed as a correct record

21 PUBLIC SPEAKING/OPEN SESSION

There were no registered public speakers.

22 CHESHIRE EAST DOMESTIC ABUSE SERVICE

The committee considered a report which provided an update following the review, consultation and engagement of the domestic abuse safe accommodation service, and the new Domestic Abuse and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2025/28.

The committee were provided with an oversight of the proposed service model and authorisation was sought to follow a competitive tender process and award the successful provider the joint service contract from 1 April 2026.

The committee asked questions and made comments in respect of:

- The need to ensure that there was appropriate support for individuals in communal refuges
- Budget and bed capacity - whether the increased budget of £1.74m was sufficient following previous failures due to lack of funding, and concerns around the reduction in specialist beds from the recommended 41 to 27 by the Council of Europe.
- Whether there was sufficient capacity for victims who must be placed outside their local area for safety reasons
- The absence of 4+ bedroom properties listed in the report.
- Whether communal refuge facilities were being explored and what the outcomes were?
- Concerns about whether accommodation reflected real-life scenarios (e.g., staying with friends first).

In response officers stated that;

- The commissioning process included strict specifications aligned with Women's Aid guidance. Providers must demonstrate trauma-informed practices and provide separate support for children and parents.
- A rapid review was commissioned over the summer, the 27 beds were specifically for crisis situations and there was a Sanctuary Scheme aimed to enhance home security, reducing the need for relocation of the victim.
- There were ongoing discussions with providers to procure dispersed accommodation.
- Properties with up to 4 bedrooms were being considered, and larger properties were not excluded.
- Emphasis was on the need for wide-ranging provision to ensure accessibility and a blended approach was preferred to maintain emergency capacity.

Officers agreed to take away the suggestion in respect of asking victims about their initial steps when reporting, to improve data collection.

In response to a question raised about the success of the council receiving the Platinum Accreditation from the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) award and how it aligned with previous procurement challenges it was noted that the Whole Housing Approach work began prior to the formal start of the 2-year project.

Members noted that there was scope to increase the number of beds beyond the provision of 27 but had concerns around the significant budget implications this would have and additionally spot purchasing beds outside the area would likely be more expensive so how would those additional costs be managed if capacity were increased.

Officers explained that they would work with colleagues in Strategic Housing to look at ways both the housing budget and Domestic Abuse funding could be used most effectively to meet the needs of victims of abuse, in line with the Single Allocation Policy, and in a way which maximised both the Council's core funding and any external grants that could support this work.

The committee expressed appreciation for the improved communication and noted the absence of public speakers could be seen as a positive reflection of progress.

RESOLVED (By Majority)

That the Children and Families Committee

1. Approve the new service model and authorise the procurement for a new service contract for a 3-year term with a 1 + 1 year extension period, noting the feedback from consultation activity over the summer, and Rapid Review analytics conducted by S2, which advise Cheshire East Council to:

a) Increase the number of safe accommodation bed spaces to a minimum of 27 specialist accommodation spaces for Cheshire East.

b) Increase the mix of communal/ dispersed refuges, in order to reduce/eliminate the use of temporary (and unsuitable) b & b accommodation for individuals fleeing domestic abuse.

c) Develop the support offered to children and young people in safe accommodation

d) Improve communication between Housing Options and the safe accommodation provider.

2. Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children's Service and/or equivalent authorised officer to conduct a competitive procurement exercise and enter dialogue with the most competitive bidder if required, issue the notice of contract award once a preferred bidder is identified.

3. Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children's Services to award the contract for the Safe Accommodation, in consultation with the S151 & Monitoring Officers, and with the agreement of the Chair and Vice-Chair of Children & Families Committee.

4. Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children's Services for contract and performance management, including all commercial assessments to oversee any contract extensions under the terms including contract performance and efficiency requirements and key performance indicators.

5. Approve the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2025-28 for endorsement and adoption by the Cheshire East Domestic and Sexual Abuse Partnership.

23 SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION FOR 16–25-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS

During consideration of item 6 - Supported Accommodation for 16–25-year-old Children in Care and Care Leavers in the interest of openness, Councillor S Gardiner declared an interest by virtue of the fact his husband was a partner in a law firm who occasionally represented cared-for children living within Cheshire East. The firm represented the children (very occasionally parents) in care-proceedings in which the Council was a party but there was no direct commissioning or procurement by CEC of his company's services.

The committee considered a report which provided an update on the recommissioning activity approved at committee in June and detailed the co-production with the stakeholders to shape the future service offer and next steps to conduct a formal tender to seek a best value service for Cared for Children and Care Leavers aged 16-25.

The committee asked questions and made comments in respect of:

- Why were 16–17-year-olds without adult status being placed into supported independent living settings rather than trying to provide appropriate foster parents.
- Concerns over planning applications where the applicant was a developer, not a care provider.
- How was the selection of the appropriate providers ensured when planning applications were granted?
- Project manager left in August — would the role be filled internally or externally? Would the budget available until March 2026 be used?
- Concerns raised over £11k/week cost for a 17-year-old.
- Had accommodation need been sufficiently modelled given rising care leaver numbers?
- Had inflation been factored into spot purchase costs?
- How were placements managed when children moved outside the local area, were there any reciprocal arrangements in place with other local authorities?
- What would happen when unaccompanied asylum seeker already in the council's system turned 18?

In response officers reported that

- 16–17-year-olds were not placed directly into independent settings, the proposal was part of a pathway to independence, aiming for tenancy readiness by age 25. The specification which had been developed had been done in collaboration with the Care Leavers Service.
- All providers must be Ofsted-registered before contracting and accepted providers for the older group of young people must also be registered housing providers.
- An internal officer would reprioritise tasks to take on the role. A contract start date of 1 July would allow for transition time.
- Costs were not unusual for complex needs and there would always be a need to contract bespoke individual support packages. Exploration around a “care cube” model (similar to what had been done for adults with complex needs) was underway to challenge and manage costs.
- Financial modelling included regional cost differences (e.g. higher costs in the north of the borough).
- Regular dialogue with neighbouring authorities was ongoing to ensure best outcomes and avoiding risk factors.
- Inflation considerations would be addressed in future MTFS planning.
- Any unaccompanied asylum seekers already in the council's care would transition to the adult housing process once they reached the age of 18.

The committee acknowledged the work of the Ignition Panel which formed part of the pathway in the process.

During debate on the item, a friendly amendment was proposed and seconded in respect of recommendation 3 which sought the inclusion of additional wording as follows:

‘Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children’s Services to award the contract for the Supported Accommodation for 16–25-year-old Children in Care and Care Leavers, in consultation with the S151 & Monitoring Officers, and with the agreement of the Chair and Vice Chair of the Children & Families Committee and that any costs above the MTFS budget be reported back to the Children and Families Committee at the earliest opportunity’.

The amendment became part of the substantive motion.

RESOLVED: (Unanimously)

That the Children and Families Committee

1. Approve the new service model and authorise the procurement for a new service contract for a 5-year term with a 1 + 1 year extension period.
2. Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children’s Service and/or equivalent authorised officer to conduct a competitive procurement exercise and enter into dialogue with the most competitive bidder, if required, issue the notice of contract award once a preferred bidder is identified.
3. Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children’s Services to award the contract for the Supported Accommodation for 16–25-year-old Children in Care and Care Leavers, in consultation with the S151 & Monitoring Officers, and with the agreement of the Chair and Vice Chair of the Children & Families Committee and that any costs above the MTFS budget be reported back to the Children and Families Committee at the earliest opportunity.
4. Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children’s Services and/or equivalent authorised officer for contract and performance management, including all commercial assessments to oversee any contract extensions under the terms including contract performance and efficiency requirements and key performance indicators.

24 **FIRST FINANCIAL REVIEW OF 2025/26**

The Committee considered the report which set out the First Financial Review 2025-26 position based on income, expenditure, and known commitments at the end of June 2025. The First Financial Review 2025-26 reported a forecasted revenue outturn position as an adverse variance of

£3.1m after the application of planned use of Exceptional Financial Support at £25.3m.

The key areas causing the overspend included a projected overspend of £9m in the Children and Families service.

Care placements and staffing costs were identified as the main pressures.

The committee asked questions and made comments in respect of:

- Although the first set of figures for quarter 2 were still being finalised, they did not present a positive outlook. Concerns were raised about Quarter 2 budget figures for Children and Families noting they remained pessimistic and did this reflect the upper limit of financial pressure?
- There were discrepancies in capital programme figures, and a request was made for clarification on budget increases.
- There was repeated overspending in children and families, particularly in transport and staffing, therefore was the budget realistic when set.
- Concerns raised about adoption and Special Guardianship Orders, legal support, and ethical recruitment of social workers.
- Children's welfare should not be compromised for financial reasons.
- statutory targets set by the government contributed to budget pressures.

In response, officers reported that:-

- Work was ongoing on Financial Report 2 (FR2) and figures would be reviewed with colleagues.
- Information on the capital programme figures would be checked outside of the meeting.
- There were three main reasons for overspending in Children and Families: Rising demand, staffing pressures and budget limitations and work was ongoing in those areas as part of the Transformation Programme

Under the title 'Right Child, Right Home' and overall mitigations planned to manage pressures included managing vacancies, particularly agency usage, reviewing costs of placements, establishment reviews, Reunification of children, and Work on Edge of Care Service proposals to identify early intervention and cost reduction.

It was reported that by the end of the month there would be ten agency Socialworkers converting to permanent posts and there would be another cohort of ten international social workers being brought forward in January 2026.

There would be a focus on sustainability which included work on the 3 Year Workforce Strategy which included plans for a Cheshire East Social Work Academy, building capacity and resilience internally.

A Task and Finish Group had been set up following June Committee to look at the work of the Home to School Transport service and transport costs. An update report was requested to be added to the work programme.

The introduction of the Families First Programme would provide early intervention support to address emerging needs within families, thereby reducing the likelihood of escalation to specialist services within Children's Services. This preventative approach would contribute to improved outcomes for children and families whilst also delivering cost efficiencies.

RESOLVED: (By Majority)

That the Children and Families Committee

1. Review the factors leading to a forecast adverse Net Revenue financial pressure of £3.1m against a revised budget of £440.5m (0.7%). To scrutinise the contents of Annex 1, Section 2 and review progress on the delivery of the MTFS approved budget policy change items, the RAG ratings and latest forecasts, and to understand the actions to be taken to address any adverse variances from the approved budget.

2. Review the in-year forecast capital spending of £205.5m against an increased capital budget of £208.5m. This was adjusted at outturn following an approved MTFS budget of £173m.

3. Approve the Supplementary Revenue Estimate Requests for Allocation of Additional Grant Funding over £500,000 and up to £1,000,000 as per Annex 1, Section 3, Table 2.

4. Note the available reserves position as per Annex 1, Section 5.

The committee adjourned for a short break.

25 FAMILIES FIRST TASK AND FINISH GROUP FEEDBACK

The committee received a detailed presentation and feedback on the work of the Families First Task and Finish Group

The presentation included information on: -

- Background and legislative context
- Key principles: early help, multidisciplinary and multi-agency teams, integrated front door, family-led decision-making.
- Local implementation in Cheshire East: collaborative areas, family hubs, data analysis, and place-based working.

- Expected benefits and challenges, including sustainability, workforce development, and statutory alignment.

Officers shared a case study highlighting current processes which often involved multiple referrals, families having to tell their story multiple times and a current requirement for workers to change should need increase or reduce

Officers explained how the new model would improve this through:

- Increased integration of services the 'Front Door'
- Earlier intervention
- Local collaboration among professionals and services
- Consistent support throughout the family's journey
- Family led decision making

The committee asked questions in relation to:-

- the next steps and whether this could include engagement with schools, town councils and community partners.
- Outcomes and performance measures
- Funding and sustainability
- Workforce training, capacity, and retention
- Data accuracy and deprivation indices

The Chair thanked the officers for all their hard work.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation and feedback be noted.

Councillor D Edwardes left the meeting and did not return.

26 IMPROVEMENT PLAN PROGRESS REPORT

The committee received an update on the progress to date against the improvement plan following the Ofsted inspection in 2024, the findings from the second Ofsted monitoring visit which took place in June 2025, the findings from the sector led improvement partner (SLIP) work in August 2025, and the findings from the councillor visits to frontline services which took place in July 2025.

Members asked questions and provided comments in respect of

- There was emphasis on the need for robustness in managing change;
- In respect of work on case closures and exit interviews; were there any common themes emerging.
- Concerns raised about senior leadership changes and vacancies affecting service delivery.

- Workload pressures: was the quality of work being maintained.
- Access to training issues
- Children & Case Management - Suspensions: was it the same children being repeatedly suspended.
- PLO (Public Law Outline): what was the reason for only 14 out of 90 targets met.
- Request in relation to fast-tracking AI for form filling.

In response officers reported that:

- Development of the workforce strategy was ongoing to address stress levels, supervision issues which had been highlighted
- managing caseloads remains difficult.
- Support for in-depth exit and stay interviews by the Principal Social Worker to understand retention.
- There were 5 permanent Heads of Service in the social care structure and 3 agency, work continued towards establishing a stable, permanent workforce.
- PLO (Public Law Outline): Backlogs and high caseloads impacting timescales
- AI was part of a corporate programme but there was a cautious approach using it in sensitive areas, but it was acknowledged that there was potential for it to be used for things such as signposting.

RESOLVED:

That the Children and Families Committee

1. Note the progress against the improvement plan.
2. Note the findings from the second Ofsted monitoring visit on children in need and child protection in June 2025.
3. Note the findings from the councillor visits to the cared for service, care leaver service and court team in July 2025.

27 DSG MANAGEMENT PLAN - REPROFILED 2025/26-2031/32

The committee received a report which provided an update of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) management plan for the period 2025/26 to 2031/32 to reflect the financial outturn position and the reduced growth of Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCP numbers as at 31 March 2025).

The DSG management plan had been reprofiled to take in to account of the reduced growth of EHCP numbers (6.4% EHCP growth – 1.6% lower than anticipated) and a lower high needs deficit position than forecast as at 31 March 2025 (£6.4 million reduction in the high needs deficit position – giving a position of £113.7 million high needs block deficit).

Officers highlighted that an in-year balanced position was still achievable by year 7 (2030/31) but that would not mean that the deficit had been paid off, it would just mean that the income matched the expenditure.

The accounting override had been extended to 2027/28 by which point the deficit reserve position was forecast to be £190.8m mitigated.

The committee asked questions and made comments in respect of:

- why only half the required funding was available for SEND children.
- As needs assessments had risen sharply which may lead to more EHCPs, were the current projections overly optimistic.
- How did the council's performance compare with other local authorities
- Concerns that reprofiling over a 7-year period did not address worsening short-term projections, was the current forecast reliable?
- Concerns about delays in timescales in respect of funding reaching children.

In response, officers reported that:-

- They were working within the current allocation and aiming to develop a long-term, affordable plan.
- They acknowledged the increase in needs assessments and explained that the management plan was based on the SEN2 survey which was produced in January 2025. Many assessments were expected to result in EHCPs and agreed the plan was challenging but last year's performance slightly exceeded expectations.
- comparisons had been made previously with other local authorities but officers could not comment further without updated data and further research.
- The original plan was for 5 years, but a more robust 7-year plan was introduced in April 2024 as part of the Safety Valve Programme. It aligned with DfE strategies and included annual updates based on EHCP outturns and financial data. Improvements had been noted since the last update.

Officers agreed to raise the issue of delays to funding reaching children with finance colleagues.

The Chair confirmed that a letter had been sent to central government regarding free schools, which were a key part of the mitigation strategy, but that no response had been received to date.

RESOLVED:

That the Children and Families Committee

1. Note and scrutinise the DSG Management plan for 2024/25 to 2030/31 (approved by Children and Families Committee on 29 April 2024) has been reprofiled/re-cast to reflect the lower number of Education, Health, and Care plans and the lower deficit position as recorded on 31 March 2025.

2. Note and scrutinise the impact of the reprofiling:

a. An in year balanced position by year 7 (2030/2031) is still achievable.

b. A reduced forecast deficit reserve position of £766.4 million unmitigated and £205.4 million mitigated by the end of March 2031.

c. A forecast deficit reserve position of £990.3 million unmitigated and £197.6 million mitigated by the end of March 2032.

3. Note the mitigations within the original plan remain in place (approved by Children and Families Committee on 29 April 24).

4. Note the accounting override has been extended to 2027/2028, by which point the deficit reserve position is forecast to be £318 million unmitigated and £190.8 million mitigated.

28 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered the Work Programme.

The following was noted:

- A request was made for public Health Officers to update the committee on the Tartan Rug and its implications, with a suggestion to extend briefings to all members.
- It was agreed that an update report on the work of the Home to School Transport Task and Finish Group be brought to committee.
- Further consideration would be given to the commencement of the Special Guardianship Order Task and Finish Group.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted.

29 MINUTES OF SUB-COMMITTEES

The committee received the minutes of the Cared for Children and Care Leavers Committee meeting held on 4 March 2025 and 24 June 2025.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be noted.

30 APPROVAL TO PROGRESS WITH THE PROPOSAL FOR THE PROVISION OF A NEW PRIMARY SCHOOL AT BASFORD EAST, SHAVINGTON

During consideration of this item Councillor B Wye declared an interest as he lived in one of the wards which was affected by the proposal.

The committee considered a report on the proposal to progress with the free school presumption process to open a new primary school in Basford East, Shavington, which include the process of attracting potential sponsors to run the new school.

A report had previously been approved by the Children and Families committee in 2022 to progress with the free school presumption process to open a new primary school in Basford East, Shavington. However, in April 2023 the Council were informed that the developer had gone into administration. Consequently, the scheme for the new school was put on hold.

Due to the length of time since the initial consultation and draft school specification documents, officers were advised by the DfE to re start the process.

During consideration of the item, the committee resolved to move into part 2 to consider the confidential appendix to the report. The committee moved back into part 1 for questions and debate.

The committee asked that the following be taken into consideration when designing the building

- That additional classrooms be constructed onsite following the proposal that the school would have facilities for a 2-Form of Entry
- Solar panels be added
- Sprinklers to be included
- Facilities to accommodate noise reduction be included
- Breakout/quiet areas
- Mitigations for the impact on parking for drop off and pick-ups to the school be put in place

Officers agreed to take the requests back to the design team.

RESOLVED: (Unanimously)

That the Children and Families Committee

1. Agree to progress with undertaking the free school presumption process to identify and obtain agreement for a new school sponsor under section 6A of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. This will include undertaking a consultation with the local community, local schools, local councillors,

town council and local MP. This is not the formal statutory consultation which sponsors are required to undertake.

2. Note that a further report will be provided to committee with the feedback from the consultation process.

3. Grant approval to enter into contract on a direct award basis with the preferred contractor.

4. Approve entering into a pre-construction services agreement and delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children's Services to award a preconstruction services contract to facilitate the delivery of a new primary school on the Basford East development site together with any other agreements associated with or ancillary to the contract where necessary in consultation with the Executive Director of Resources/S151 Officer, the Governance, Compliance and Monitoring Officer and the Executive Director of Place.

5. Approve the increase in the capital budget required to progress with the new school proposal as set out in the confidential Appendix 1 and request Finance sub-committee to approve the virement of the funds from Basic Need grant to support the scheme.

31 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED:

That the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item pursuant to Section 100(A)4 of the Local Government Act 1972 as amended on the grounds that it involves the likely discussion of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of the Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 and the public interest would not be served in publishing the information.

32 APPROVAL TO PROGRESS WITH THE PROPOSAL FOR THE PROVISION OF A NEW PRIMARY SCHOOL AT BASFORD EAST, SHAVINGTON

The Committee considered the information in the confidential appendix.

The meeting commenced at 10.30 am and concluded at 3.30 pm

Councillor L Crane (Chair)