

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Committee**
held on Wednesday, 31st January, 2024 in the

PRESENT

Councillor C Bulman (Chair)
Councillor L Anderson (Vice-Chair)

Councillors R Bailey, M Beanland, S Bennett-Wake, D Clark, E Gilman,
G Hayes, B Posnett, J Clowes and J Rhodes

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Deborah Woodcock, Executive Director of Children's Services
Claire Williamson, Director of Education, Strong Start and Integration
Kerry Birtles, Director of Children's Social Care
Jennie Summers, Legal Team Manager
Nikki Wood-Hill, Lead Finance Partner
Josie Lloyd, Democratic Services Officer

64 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors R Kain, J Saunders, G Smith and L Smith.

Councillors J Clowes and J Rhodes attended as substitutes.

65 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In the interest of openness and transparency Councillor S Bennett-Wake declared that she was a teaching assistant at one of the schools referred to in the reports.

During consideration of item 6, Councillor R Bailey declared, in relation to proposal CF 6 (school catering subsidy), that she was a local food producer.

66 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 December 2023 be agreed as a correct record.

67 PUBLIC SPEAKING/OPEN SESSION

There were no public speakers.

68 THIRD FINANCIAL REVIEW 2023/24 (CHILDREN AND FAMILIES)

The Committee received the report which provided an overview of the Cheshire East Council forecast outturn for the financial year 2023/24 and the financial performance of the services relevant to the committee remit.

Members were asked to consider the serious financial challenges being experienced by the council (and other councils) and to recognise the important activities outlined which aimed at minimising the impact on services.

An amendment was moved and seconded which sought to add the word 'note' as well as 'consider' to recommendations 1 – 4. This was carried by majority.

In response to members comments and questions officers reported that

- Officers would take away a request for the commentary of the report to be supported by figures
- A written response would be provided on the average cost of care placements.
- In respect of costs for consultancy fees information could be clarified outside of the meeting and it was noted that these had been presented in previous reports to committee

RESOLVED (by majority):

That the Children and Families Committee

1. Consider and note the report of the Finance Sub Committee: Finance Sub Committee, 11th January, 2024
2. Consider and note the factors leading to a forecast adverse net revenue financial pressure of £10.0m against a revised budget of £80.3m (12.5%).
3. Consider and note the forecast and further mitigations needing to be identified, aimed at bringing spending back in line with budget, for Children and Families services.
4. Consider and note the in-year forecast Capital Spending of £34.5m against an approved MTFs budget of £53.8m, due to slippage that has been re-profiled into future years, in respect of Children and Families projects.
5. Approve fully funded supplementary revenue estimates over £500,000 up to £1,000,000 in accordance with Financial Procedure Rules as detailed in Appendix 2 Children and Families Committee, Section 2 Corporate Grants Register, Table 3.
6. Scrutinise the contents of Annex 1 and Appendix 2 and note that any financial mitigation decisions requiring approval will be made in line with relevant delegations.

69 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY CONSULTATION 2024/25 - 2027/28 PROVISIONAL SETTLEMENT UPDATE (CHILDREN & FAMILIES COMMITTEE)

The Committee received a report on the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for 2024/25 – 2027/28 and the revenue and capital proposals contained within the MTFS relating to the committee's responsibilities. As part of the consultation process the committee was asked to provide comments and feedback to the Corporate Policy Committee on proposals related to the responsibilities of the committee.

The Committee made the following comments on the proposals:

Proposal CF1: Discretionary offer to children with disabilities

- Concerns were raised in respect of making savings of £900k which may mean there would be some compromise on outcomes.

Officers advised members that although the practice was what they were used to delivering, given the current context they were scrutinising that practice to ensure that it was adding value.

Short breaks were also commissioned through a framework and officers could see that there were opportunities to deliver similar services and be more inclusive through already established services.

- Concerns were raised in respect of the capacity of the team and pressures put on them in respect of this proposal and their ability to deliver it.

Officers offered reassurance to members that the intention was to monitor and review capacity to ensure quality services were provided and the advantage of being an integrated children services system meant that this would help with continuity and support any capacity challenges.

- It was suggested that when considering short breaks and outcomes for children, consideration should be given to outcomes for parents.
- Members found it difficult to compare what was being delivered currently when they did not have the detail on what was expected to be delivered after the saving was made.
- It was queried to what extent had the service providers looked at means tested provision on the discretionary elements of what the council provides at present.
- Concerns were raised in respect of the idea of increasing and promoting the use of family hubs as a solution but one of the proposals was to reduce the budget for the family hubs so it was queried what was the impact of those ideas in respect of deliverability.

Assurance was offered that through analysis of practice and behaviour which had assisted officers in suggesting the proposals, decision making considered need rather than want to support the most vulnerable.

Proposal CF2: Remove school catering subsidy

- Concerns were raised that this could be the 'beginning of the end' of the school catering service within Cheshire East because by increasing costs schools would start to look elsewhere and there was competition within the private sector. Whilst the consultation had been in the public domain some schools may not be aware of the proposal and as they were also entering a challenging budget setting period the council's proposals may have a knock on impact. A request was made for communication and messaging to be clearer for schools and to share information on the options that were being looked at.

Officers reported that they had attended the primary and secondary executive groups and the consultation document had been circulated to all schools.

- School catering is not a statutory function of the council.
- Some schools had already opted out of the system and others were looking at it as they thought they may get better value for money elsewhere.

Proposal CF3: Review of structure to further integrate children and families services

- It was queried if there was a risk of a knowledge void when people are taking MARS and cannot be replaced because of the nature of the scheme.

Officers reported that services retained 50% of the budget and consideration was given to skills and experience within the service and that those would not be compromised.

- It was queried if the £1m projected saving would be incorporated into the resources for the safety valve work

Officers stated that the calculation for the safety valve work was separate.

- In respect of timelines and capacity for delivery, officers reported that decisions on MARS applications were underway and would be confirmed by 1 April 2024.

Proposal CF4: Reduce discretionary Post-16 Travel Support

- The service is discretionary, and the council could no longer afford discretion.
- The borough had a large rural area so consideration would need to be given to distances and other family commitments and a request was put forward that this was done on a case-by-case basis.
- It was queried whether consideration been given to talking to bus services and taxi drivers in respect of reduced fares.

Proposal CF5: Achieve the Family Hub model

- A request was made for the proposal to be considered as part of a holistic review of the council's estate.

Proposal CF6: Other Service Reviews

- It was queried what additional services were being proposed and whether there was marketing intelligence which sat beneath those due to the competitiveness of the market.

Proposal CF7: Reduce Growth in expenditure

- There were concerns in respect of being able to achieve the savings due to the challenging market position nationally
- It was queried how the proposal aligned with the council's ambition to become a consistently good or outstanding authority in Ofsted ratings because the more pressure put on commissioned places would have a negative effect on pressures elsewhere.

Councillor Clowes put forward the following proposals on behalf of the Conservative party.

Poynton Primary School: SEND Capital Modification

A1) A clear schedule for development of all SEND-related estates must be included in the Work Programme for Children & Families together with those of affiliated Committees, with clear KPIs and Project Management oversight throughout the life of each project.

A2) It is acknowledged that Capital Projects related to Childrens & Families SEND and other provisions will not realise returns for 2024/25 nonetheless, it is essential that these projects are clearly and immediately articulated in this year's medium and long-term planning.

A3) Such projects have a lead-in time of at least two/three years and therefore must be scheduled in the work programme from the outset. This applies to those projects currently in progress (eg primary School on the Kingsbourne Estate in Nantwich), but also to those estates (such as Poynton Primary School), where re-modelling is the preferred option.

Adult Social Care and Children and Families high cost care packages

Ba) We welcome the review of all high-cost residential placements through the Head of Service Lead Panel.

- It is proposed that the Children & Families Committee has oversight of the Outcomes of this work on a quarterly basis as part of the quarterly MTFS reports and that this be reflected in the Work Programme.

Bb) Transition from Childrens to Adults Services is a critical area for both committees and must comply with the principles underpinning other CEC 'All-Age' Strategies and Policies. (Eg Carers Strategy / Safeguarding Policies).

- It is therefore proposed that this work is designed in collaboration with the Adult Social Care & Health Committee.

- In terms of fiscal sustainability, transition is the point at which the Children and Families Sufficiency Plan must also dovetail with those of Adults and Health (and NHS partners).

- The DSG Management Plan post Safety Valve must be managed alongside these cross-directorate synergies (business as usual).

Bc) MTFS proposals related to asset management projects have consistently failed to deliver on schedule over the past 4 years (for a multitude of reasons not always within the remit of council). Nonetheless the proposals set out in section A are equally applicable here:

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Review the School Meals Service

Ci) The MTFS existing proposals re the School Meals Service relates only to the subsidy provided by CEC. It is recognised that a significant number of schools have already opted out of the service altogether, with no impact on pupils from the consequent removal of council subsidies by default. Many others are also in the process of commissioning alternative catering providers through the benefits of Multi-Academy Groups.

There is a cogent argument that CEC should therefore consider withdrawing from school catering altogether. (Noting that this has no impact on those pupils eligible for free school meals).

It is proposed that CEC should conduct a cost-benefit analysis to evaluate whether or not providing a CEC school catering service remains a viable option in the medium term.

National Kinship Care Strategy

- It is proposed that this work is further progressed in 2024/25 (and beyond), to help reduce the £10,825m growth in Children's Home Placement Costs.

- It is proposed that the KPIs of the Family Network service are brought to the C&F Committee for oversight and scrutiny as part of the quarterly MTFS report.

Children / Adults Social Workers “Bank”

Ei) We welcome this collaboration regarding a ‘Not for Profit’ agency.

Eii) It is understood that recruitment and retention of permanent and peripatetic staff is preferable to Agency services. So too it is understood that there are potentially perverse incentives to operating an agency provision. However, the Nursing Agency Model offers useful insight into why largely female workforces prefer to work for an agency (it’s not always financial) or is unable to take full-time work.

So too, a ‘local’ agency is more likely to offer the localities and conditions under which agency staff may be encouraged to accept a permanent position as their personal situations change.

- It is proposed that the C&F Committee include this project on their Work Programme and that the time scale for implementing an agency of this type and the KPIs it is anticipated to achieve are clearly articulated and monitored.

Safe Walking Routes to School

F) In the current consultation there is mention of reducing discretionary post-16 travel Support (CF4) and “Growth in School Transport Budget reflecting the increase in special education needs and disabilities (SEND)”.

There is no overt mention in this year’s MTFS proposals related to developing ‘safe walking routes to school’ for non-SEND children living within the statutory 2-mile and 3-mile distances from school as outlined in policy and statute.

Historic approaches to progress this work have been thwarted by covid and other budget priorities. Nonetheless, capital investment in this work would pay for itself in acceptably short time-frames (1 to 5 years on completion of works), creating on-going budget savings.

- It is proposed that a combined officer team is convened specifically to provide a multi-directorate, co-ordinated approach.

- It is proposed that i) a ‘live’ portfolio of potential walking routes is compiled, ii) each option prioritised in terms of cost, deliverability and returns and iii) that the Children and Families Committee is appraised of progress as part of the MTFS quarterly reviews with the remit to bring forward projects for delivery.

- The aim would be to deliver two routes in-year with further routes scheduled on an annual basis. This type of project may also attract sustainable transport grants to help off-set cost.

It was proposed and seconded that the proposals in Appendix 1 and the Conservative Group proposals be recommended to the Corporate Policy Committee for inclusion in the Council’s budget 2024/25. This was carried by majority.

RESOLVED (by majority):

That the Children and Families Committee

- 1 recommend to the Corporate Policy Committee, for their meeting on 13 February 2024, all proposals within the budget consultation, as related to the Committee's responsibilities, for inclusion in the Council's budget for 2024/25.
- 2 the additional proposals from the Conservative Group be recommended to the Corporate Policy Committee for inclusion in the Council's budget proposals.

70 WORK PROGRAMME

The committee considered the work programme. Officers would review the work programme following the proposals put forward in the meeting.

Officers informed the committee that the report scheduled for the February committee in respect of the Childrens' Centre remodel would now be scheduled for April 2024.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted.

The meeting commenced at 10.00 and concluded at 12.15

Councillor C Bulman (Chair)