

# **CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL**

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Committee**  
held on Monday, 7th April, 2025 in The Capesthorne Room - Town Hall,  
Macclesfield SK10 1EA

## **PRESENT**

Councillor L Crane (Chair)

Councillors R Bailey, M Beanland, S Bennett-Wake, J Bird, N Cook,  
B Posnett, B Puddicombe, J Saunders, G Smith, B Wye, D Edwardes and  
L Wardlaw

## **OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE**

Joanne Prophet, School Organisation and Capital Manager  
Theresa Leavy – Interim Executive Director of Children and Families  
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  
Nikki Wood-Hill, Finance Manager  
Diane Green – Finance Manager  
Karen Shuker, Democratic Services Officer  
Julie Gregory – Head of Legal Services

The Chair welcomed Councillor B Wye to the Committee who replaced Councillor C Bulman and expressed thanks to Councillor C Bulman for her years of service to Children's and Families.

## **91 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E Gilman and G Hayes.

Councillors D Edwardes and L Wardlaw were present as substitutes.

## **92 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

In the interests of openness, Councillor M Beanland declared that he had received correspondence in relation to MyCWA. The Chair responded that all committee members had received similar correspondence and that a briefing was being arranged for members in relation to this matter.

## **93 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

An amendment to Minute no. 90 - Work Programme, was proposed, and seconded to add the following line after the fourth paragraph: -:

Councillor C Bulman confirmed that the decision to review MyCWA funding was discussed and agreed in November 2023 Committee.

On being put to the vote the amendment was carried.

**RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 February 2025, subject to the above amendment being made, be approved as a correct record.

**94 PUBLIC SPEAKING/OPEN SESSION**

There were no public speakers.

**95 SERVICE BUDGETS 2025/26 (CHILDREN & FAMILIES COMMITTEE)**

*Cllr Bird joined the meeting during consideration of this item*

The Committee considered the report which set out the proposed allocation of approved budgets for the Children and Families Committee, following approval of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy at full Council on 26 February 2025.

The details of the budget allocations were set out in Annex A to the report. Financial reporting would occur regularly to ensure budget adherence and prevent overspending. The financial reporting timetable for 2025/26 set was out in Annex B to the report.

Further to the list of questions below, members were invited to send their questions in detail to the Finance Manager who would provide a written response outside of the meeting which would be circulated to the Committee and published on the website.

- 1) Was there any member involvement in the Capital Programme Board?
- 2) Who was reviewing cash costs and project delivery in respect of the Capital Programme?
- 3) Was there an update on the Springfield – Middlewich project and how would Committee be kept informed of any increase in costs relating to the project?
- 4) As so much was reliant on development costs, which came first the funding or the spending?
- 5) More detail was requested in respect of what the Digital Blueprint was and what were the benefits of it?
- 6) What were transformation expenses?

Officers reported that across the whole of the organisation efficiencies needed to be found and the best efficiency that could be found in Children's Services was better life outcomes for children. By integrating services and adopting a more local approach, as seen with the Children's

Wellbeing Bill and Families First initiatives, the Council could provide support earlier. That approach would not only reduce costs but provide better outcomes for children and families.

In response to concerns raised in respect of the financial position around any reductions in the service, committee members would be invited to be part of a Task and Finish Group in respect of the Children's Wellbeing Bill that would look at how it could help to reshape the service.

**RESOLVED:**

That the Children and Families Committee

1 note the decision of the Finance Sub Committee to allocate the approved revenue and capital budgets, related budget changes items and earmarked reserves to the Children and Families Committee, as set out in Annex A to the report.

2 note the financial reporting timetable for 2025/26, as set out in Annex B to the report, as approved at the Finance Sub Committee on 10 March 2025.

**96 CHILDREN AND FAMILIES CAPITAL PROGRAMME -CAPITAL SCHEMES (INCLUDING NEW, NAMED, AND AMENDED SCHEMES AND SCHOOL CONDITION PROGRAMME)**

The Committee considered a report on the Children and Families Capital Programme – Capital schemes (including new, named, and amended schemes and School Condition Programme).

Officers agreed to provide a written response to the following questions: -

- 1) What the forecast was for future intake of classes and whether they were increasing or decreasing, and whether extra school places were required?
- 2) What were the number of teacher vacancies within Cheshire East schools?

In response to concerns raised in respect of the delay in the decision on the Westfield SEN scheme and Crewe Alternative Provision, the Director for Education, Strong Start and Integration confirmed that they had written to Government Ministers and a response had been received to say that it was still being looked at and as soon as any further response was received this would be shared with Committee.

In response to concerns raised in respect of recommendation 5 around any specific checks and balances that were place in relation to any overspends or underspends exceeding 20% and up to 500K, officers reported those would be referred back to the Capital Board for review.

An amendment was put forward which sought to make the following changes to the recommendations as set out in the report:

- That recommendation 6 reads '*Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children's Services to allocate uncommitted funds up to the value of £100,000 to enable the progression of feasibility studies, design development and project delivery, where projects will be for the purpose of supporting additional pupil places, SEN schemes, condition schemes and any necessary accommodation updates to school settings*'.
- That an additional recommendation be included to read '*Further to the Director for Education, Strong Start and Integration writing to Government Ministers, that the Chair of the Children and Families Committee writes to all local MPs and appropriate Government Ministers to express the importance of a swift decision on the Westfields SEN Provision and Crewe Alternative Provision*'.

The amendments became part of the substantive proposition.

There was a request for a copy of the correspondence to be shared with Committee members.

In response to a question in respect of Academies and Diocesan bodies and the wider capital programme, officers agreed to schedule a briefing for Committee members to understand how the process worked.

Officers undertook to bring a report to Committee on a "Plan B" should the Westfields SEN Scheme and Crewe Alternative Provision not proceed as hoped.

**RESOLVED:** (By Majority)

The Children and Families Committee is recommended to:

1. To note the overview of current schemes in progress and those completed during 2024/25 as detailed in Appendix 1.
2. Agree the allocation of the Children and Families Capital funding as approved in the budget by full council on 26 February 2025 to the schools and projects as set out in Appendix 2.
3. Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children's Services to determine the school sites and works to be carried out from the block allocations set out in Appendix 2 and take all necessary steps to deliver those works.
4. To approve the new, named and amended schemes as detailed in Appendix 3.

5. Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children's Services to approve uplifts to project costs of individual schemes approved in the Capital Programme to a maximum of 20% of the approved capital budget or £500,000 whichever is the lesser sum, in consultation with the Chief Finance Officer where required by the Finance Procedure Rules.
6. Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Children's Services to allocate uncommitted funds up to the value of £100,000 to enable the progression of feasibility studies, design development and project delivery, where projects will be for the purpose of supporting additional pupil places, SEN schemes, condition schemes and any necessary accommodation updates to school settings.
7. Delegate to the Executive Director of Children's Services the authority to approve Virements and where necessary enter into grant agreements with Academies and Diocesan bodies to facilitate the delivery of the projects identified in the Children and Families Capital Programme.
8. To note the information provided in appendix 4, Briefing note – Condition, Compliance and Health & Safety assessments in our schools.
9. To note that the Executive Director of Children's Services will provide a regular update to committee on the implementation of the Children and Families Capital Programme and the exercise of the delegations set out in this report.
10. To note that the Executive Director of Children's Services will provide a further report to committee detailing the school condition programme once the school condition grant allocation has been announced by the DfE.
11. Further to the Director for Education, Strong Start and Integration writing to Government Ministers, that the Chair of the Children and Families Committee writes to all local MPs and appropriate Government Ministers to express the importance of a swift decision on the Westfields SEND Provision and Crewe Alternative Provision.

## **97 IMPROVEMENT PLAN PROGRESS UPDATE**

The Committee received an update on the progress to date against the improvement plan and an update on the findings from the Ofsted monitoring visit on the front door. The update outlined the strengths within the Front Door and leadership team, and areas for development with the Front Door.

The next monitoring visit would take place in June and would focus on those children subject to child protection processes and children in need.

Key improvement activity which had taken place since the last Committee was outlined and officers reported that 20% of actions had now been completed against the action plan.

The Committee congratulated the team on how much progress had been made.

Clarity was sought in respect of frontline visits as the report stated that the weeklong partnership learning opportunities that had taken place in February had replaced the previous programme of frontline visits, and that Councillors had been invited to participate in the programme, when the invite had only been sent to the Chair and Vice Chair of the committee.

Officers stated it was the intention to facilitate Councillors to have those conversations with frontline practitioners, however, the terminology and understanding of what "frontline visits" entailed had evolved over time. To address this a paper would be presented to committee to clearly define and outline the structure and expectations of those visits.

Previous information from frontline visits undertaken throughout the year by councillor's work had ceased, but officers committed to reinstating the process which would be accompanied by an overview of practice and activities to ensure councillors had a comprehensive understanding of the service and issues faced by frontline practitioners.

In response to a question raised in respect of when information would be available on the use and cost of private unregulated alternative provision placements in terms of value for money and but also in terms of young people engaged in meaningful education and their outcomes officers agreed to bring a report back to committee.

In response to the Committees concerns in respect of recruitment and retention officers reported that following the Wellbeing Bill there may be a possibility to reshape and redeliver some roles within the service, however some roles were a statutory function.

In response to a question raised about oversight around recruitment and retention officers confirmed that performance scorecards were taken to the Improvement Board along with a HR report and a piece of work was underway to look at how the Board could support the end-to-end process of recruitment and retention.

In response to a question raised in respect of the types of contracts overseas social workers were on and whether these would be made permanent like the agency workers contracts, officers agreed to provide a written response outside of the meeting.

Career progression was not always obvious so there was a need to ensure there were enough routes for people to progress and a need to focus on reducing workloads and supporting managers with training and development.

**RESOLVED:**

That the Committee

1. Note the progress against the improvement plan.
2. Note the findings from the Ofsted monitoring visit on the front door.

**98 DELIVERY PROPOSALS FOR THE HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT FUND (HSF7) 2025/26**

The Committee considered a report on the delivery proposals for the Household Support Fund (HSF7) 2025/26.

The funding allocation for Cheshire East Council was approximately £600k less than this year, which was a 15% reduction from the previous budget. This was a nationwide reduction and had not just applied to Cheshire East.

Officers agreed to provide a breakdown of support at ward level to members outside of the meeting.

In respect of the challenges around marketing the Household Support Fund, especially in rural areas, officers agreed to provide information to Councillors on how they could refer people and the channels available to accessing the Household Support Fund.

**RESOLVED:** (by Majority)

The Children and Families Committee

1. Endorse the proposed delivery model of the Household Support Fund for 2025/26.
2. Delegate authority of the grant to the Executive Director of Children's Services.

**99 ACADEMISATION OF ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL, MIDDLEWICH**

The Committee considered the report on the academisation of St. Mary's Catholic Primary School, Middlewich.

Officers undertook to provide a written response to a question raised in respect of what the specified time period was for the Council to facilitate

the academisation of schools, and how many schools had been converted to academies within that specified time period.

**RESOLVED** (Unanimously):

That the Children and Families Committee:

1. Authorise the Executive Director of Children's Services in consultation with the Chief Finance Officer and the Acting Governance, Compliance and Monitoring Officer to take all steps necessary to agree and execute the Commercial Transfer Agreement (Appendix 1) to Our Lady Help of Christians Catholic Academy Trust relating to the transfer of all staff under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006, and assets.

2. Authorise the Executive Director of Place and Chief Finance Officer to take the steps necessary to agree the required transactions in relation to land, and completion of a lease (see Appendix 2) to Our Lady Help of Christians Catholic Academy Trust for 125 years substantially in the form of the model lease produced by DfE at a peppercorn rent. The school playing field is identifiable as shown on the accompanying redline lease plan (see Appendix 3 of the report).

## 100 **ACADEMISATION 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 Children and Families Committee note the forward plan in Appendix 1.

## 101 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee considered the Work Programme. The following was noted:

- It was agreed that the Chair would review the agendas for June and September Committee to assess which meeting would be suitable for a twilight meeting. Members agreed for the twilight meeting to commence at 5.30pm.
- It was agreed that the Terms of Reference for the Task and Finish Groups which are established would be circulated to committee for comment then brought back to committee to be ratified.
- An item that was requested in respect of better and earlier engagement with Cheshire Fire and Rescue in respect of sprinklers in new builds and how it is embedded in the process would require further discussions.

**MINUTES OF SUB-COMMITTEES**

The committee received the minutes of the Cared for Children and Care Leavers Committee meeting held on 3 December 2024.

**RESOLVED:**

That the minutes be noted.

The meeting commenced at 2.00 pm and concluded at 4.45 pm

Councillor L Crane (Chair)