

**Medway Council**  
**Meeting of Children and Young People Overview and**  
**Scrutiny Committee**

**Thursday, 6 March 2025**

**6.30pm to 9.07pm**

**Record of the meeting**

**Subject to approval as an accurate record at the next meeting of this committee**

**Present:** Councillors: Howcroft-Scott (Chairperson), Animashaun, Campbell, Gulvin, Hamilton, Jackson, Joy, Perfect, Spring and Mrs Turpin

**Co-opted Members with voting rights on educational issues only:**

Lenny Williams (C of E Diocese Representative, Rochester Diocesan Board of Education) and Sharon Docherty (Roman Catholic Diocese Representative, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark)

**Added members without voting rights:**

Alice Pledger (Teacher Representative) and Lisa Scarrott (Medway Parent and Carers Forum)

**Substitutes:** Councillors:  
Cook (Substitute for Mandaracas)

**In Attendance:** Celia Buxton, Assistant Director, Education and SEND  
Kelly Cogger, Assistant Director Children's Social Care  
Councillor Tracy Coombs, Portfolio Holder for Education  
Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer  
Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive  
Aeilish Geldenhuys, Head of Public Health Programmes  
James Harman, Head of Children's Services Commissioning  
Councillor Adam Price, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services (including statutory responsibility)  
David Reynolds, Head of Revenue Accounts

**734 Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Lammas, Mandaracas, Medway Youth Council, Leanna Rogers (Headteacher Representative), Svajune Ulinskiene (Healthwatch Medway).

**735 Record of meeting**

The record of the meeting held on 9 January 2025 was agreed and signed as correct.

**736 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances**

There were none.

**737 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping**

Disclosable pecuniary interests

Councillor Cook declared that she was a senior leader at the Leigh Academies Trust, a director of the Leigh Institute. This would preclude her in engaging in discussion should specific reference be made to any of the schools under the Trust.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

There were none.

Other interests

There were none.

**738 Meeting Theme: Portfolio Holders Holding to Account**

The discussion and decision of this item can be found at minute numbers 738a and 738b.

**a Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services**

**Discussion:**

Councillor Adam Price, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services was in attendance and took questions from the Committee.

Members raised several questions and comments which included:

The Portfolio Holder was congratulated on his award for his service to fostering.

The additional funding added to the fostering improvement package was welcomed. It was commented that foster carers were returning to Medway due to the support that was now in place such as the Mocking Bird Project.

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The Reverse Budy scheme by the Children and Young People Council was praised for enabling discussions to take place on things that young people had not been able to talk about freely in the past.

**Youth Justice** - in response to a question on what assurance there was that good progress was being made and achievement of good outcomes, the Portfolio Holder was confident in the progress made. The Youth Justice Plan enabled increased opportunities for collaborative and multiagency work to be undertaken.

**Recruitment and retention** – it was asked what progress had been made on ‘growing our own.’ The Portfolio Holder said that the Council was committed to supporting the development of its staff and rewarding their hard work and commitment. There had been a recent 5% pay award for staff and there had been detailed work undertaken to improve the offer for foster carers as well as recognition for their hard work and ensuring they received high levels of support. There would however always be a natural output of foster carers, and the service was diligent in ensuring exit interviews were held to gain insight and understanding of reasons for leaving.

**Adoption** – it was asked what was being done to overcome issues with adoption figures which still remained low. The Portfolio holder reminded the Committee that embarking on the adoption process was a long and vigorous process, with checks and balances to be completed at every stage. Prospective adopters continued to be extensively throughout the journey.

**Work with regional partners and LGA-** it was asked how working with other bodies supported the work of the Portfolio Holder. The Committee was informed that the training offer and opportunities to meet with other Lead Members to share learning had been instrumental to the role. The opportunities to meet regularly with other Local Authorities was a useful tool of self-evaluation.

**Journey from Good to Outstanding** -in response to questions on what progress had been made and what significant investment was being made to achieve outcomes, the Portfolio Holder said that the service was committed to achieving their aspirations. The senior leadership team was commended for their hard work, drive, and dedication. Regular overview meetings took place to track trajectory and to ensure line of sight of issues.

**Children with disabilities** – it was commented that this was an area for improvement as highlighted in the last inspection and it was asked what progress had been made. The Portfolio Holder said that the Medway Parent Carer Forum had been instrumental in provision of support in raising standards of the service through their feedback. There was however more work to be done and remained an area of focus.

**Accommodation** – it was asked what was being done to improve the accommodation offer for young care leavers and ensure that they were placed in suitable accommodation. The Portfolio Holder acknowledged the challenges

with provision for suitable accommodation. There were high proportion of children in Medway living in temporary accommodation and officers worked extensively to address issues. There was also work being undertaken through the emerging Local Plan to ensure that young care leavers had priority for housing. Officers added that there was now a young inspectors programme in place where former care leavers would conduct a round of inspection of prospective supported accommodation to assess standards and ensure they were fit for purpose.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the report.

## **b Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Education**

### **Discussion:**

Councillor Tracy Coombs, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services was in attendance and took questions from the Committee.

Members raised several questions and comments which included:

**Partnerships** - in response to a question on working relationships, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that there was good relationship with the leadership of schools including Academies and she was able to hold open and frank discussions on ambitions and expectations. The relationship with the Department for Education and the regional schools presented some challenges and there would be a meeting with the regional schools director to discuss issues in detail.

**Challenges in Medway Education system** – in response to a question on what the main concerns were in the system and what actions were being taken to improve attainment for children with Education Health Care Plans (EHCP), the Committee was informed that some of the main challenges was as a result of increase in demand, and trying to meet needs whilst working to balance the budget. A symposium had taken place last year on how to improve outcomes for all children in Medway. There had been an increase in resourcing for children with EHCP including recruitment of Educational Psychologist to address issues with backlog of Plans, and additional financial resourcing for schools to help meet needs whilst awaiting the outcomes of EHCP assessments.

**Elective Home Education (EHE)** – it was asked what quality of education the high number of children who received EHE. The Committee learnt that there were approximately 1000 children received EHE. Parents had the right to EHE, and the Local Authority had limited powers to refuse their request. The Local Authority worked closely with school leaders in understanding parents decisions and the Fair Access Panel worked well to re-integrate children back into the school environment as needed. The Local Authority had limited powers to inspect the home education provision arranged by parents and carers,

however the new Education Wellbeing and Schools Bill would afford Locals Authorities more powers, in particular the ability to refuse a EHE request where risk factors were identified.

It was further asked what the reasons behind the choice made for EHE and whether pupils who were excluded were included in the figures. The Committee was informed that pupil that were excluded from schools were not included in the EHE figures. Parents and carers did not have to give a reason for their decision to EHE and there could many reasons for that decision including but not limited to breakdown in relationship with the schools or parents believing that it was the best decision for the child in the present circumstance.

**Outcomes** - it was commented that persistent absence rates had improved but literacy, numeracy and exam results outcomes remained low. The Portfolio Holder said that attendance rates had improved but acknowledged there was still work being undertaken to improve the small number of persistent absence rates. There were various strategies in place to address issues with attainment such as a refreshed literacy strategy. There was also extensive peer to peer support between schools and the Local Authority provided support to address attainment outcomes.

**Backlog of EHCP cases** – in response to a question on what progress had been made in clearing the backlog of cases, the Portfolio Holder acknowledged that there had been a substantial back log of cases which was in excess of 700. Additional funding resource was agreed and put in place to tackle clearance of the backlog through the employment of Locum Educational Psychologist to deal with the backlog whilst the permanent team managed the current cases. This workstream had resulted in only 186 cases left to be worked through by the team and it was anticipated that they would be cleared in the next few months, at which time the contract for the Locums would end.

**Ofsted**- in response to a question on what preparation was taking place for a new future with Ofsted way of working, the Committee was informed that the service would continue to monitor progress in all aspects regardless of the fact that Ofsted rating judgements would no longer be in place. They had worked with schools to develop performance dashboards to which the Local Authority would monitor and use to challenge schools where necessary.

**School Places** – it was commented that whilst over 90% of pupils had been offered one of their preferred choice of school, the number of pupils that were given their first choice had declined. The Committee was informed that this was due to a number of factors such as parents not listing their local school as their first choice and applying for schools much further away. In order for more children to attend their local schools, it had to be listed as a preference on their application.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the report.

## 739 Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

### Discussion:

The Committee received a report on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill and was informed that there were seven key parts to the Bill which were highlighted in the presentation.

The Assistant Director of Education and SEND proposed that due to the changes relating to Elective Home Education (EHE) coupled with the fact that there had been notable increase to the number of children being EHE, a mini review be conducted to gain a better understanding of the reasons behind the choice made to EHE.

It was proposed that the mini review consist of 1 representative Member from each political party and 1 Co-Opted Member, in this instance, the Medway Parent Carer Forum (MPCF) to work with officers, with proposed completion of the review by October 2025 and findings to be reported back to the Committee.

The Democratic Services Officer clarified that this was an officer led mini review, and this sat outside of the Councils Task and Finish Group Reviews, for which there was already an agreed protocol.

**Financial Implications** – it was asked what financial implications would arise as a result of the Bill and what work was being undertaken with other parts of the sector that may be impacted. The Committee was informed that there would be financial implications and regardless of the current financial envelope in place, delivery of services would have to be transformed. Work would be undertaken with partners to establish a Child Protection Multiagency which would be a change in culture due to alterations that would have to be made to ways of working. There would also be additional costs and limitations in resources to be mindful of.

Concern was raised regarding funding to support the proposals of the Bid, due to budget constraints faced by many Councils in discharging their statutory duties. The Committee was informed that details of funding guidance to support this had yet to materialise as the Bill was still going through the necessary process.

**Suitability of Elective Home Education**- in response to a comment that EHE was suitable for some children's individual needs, it was clarified that the Bill did not seek to remove rights from parents to EHE in instances where it was being done well. It sought to address issues where children may be at risk or known to children's social care, or where the education they received at home was not appropriate as presently the Local Authority had limited powers to intervene. The additional duties associated with the proposals were welcomed and it was acknowledged that as a result, there would be an increase in children returning to the school environment. The service would have to work closely with schools to understand needs and ensure that schools and families were appropriately supported.

**Decision:**

- a) The Committee noted the report
- b) The Committee agreed for a mini review led by the Assistant Director of Education and SEND into Elective Home Education to be conducted, with findings to be reported back to the Committee.

**740 Capital Budget Monitoring - Round 3 2024/25**

**Discussion:**

The Committee received the report on the results of the third round of the Council's capital budget monitoring process for 2024/25. There was a projected under spend £7.21million across the whole council against a budget of £329million. Within the remit of this Committee there was a projected underspend of £2.356million although as indicated as a result of the recommendations at 1.2-1.4 of the report being agreed at full Council, the Capital Programme would be reduced and there would no longer be an underspend in these schemes.

**Decision:**

- a) The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the results of the third round of capital budget monitoring for 2024/25.
- b) The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted that Cabinet recommended to Full Council the addition of £43,647 of capital budget to the Hoo Dining and Changing scheme. £14,672 is to be funded from s106 developer contributions (MC/17/0962) and the remainder is to be funded from unallocated Basic Need grant.
- c) The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted that Cabinet recommended to Full Council the addition of £52,950 of capital budget to be allocated to the Maritime Academy Science Block scheme, funded by borrowing in advance of s106 developer contributions (MC/21/2225) which have not yet been received.
- d) The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted that Cabinet recommended to Full Council the removal of £2.4million for the Sir Joseph Williamson's SEND scheme from the Capital Programme. The service will request a new capital addition once an alternative grammar provision has been identified.



## 741 Revenue Budget Monitoring - Round 3 2024/25

### Discussion:

The Committee received the report on the results of the third round of the Council's Revenue Budget monitoring process for 2024/25. The overall overspend across the Council forecast of £4.8million which was an improvement of just under £2.8million reported on at round 2 monitoring, with the remit of this committee, there is an overspend of approximately £3.5million which is improvement of £800k from the position at round 2 reporting.

**Safety Valve** – It was asked what the implications would be as it appeared that the targets in the Safety Valve Improvement Plans would not be met. The Committee was informed that the service was performing slightly below target and as a result discussions took place with the schools forum and they agreed a transfer from schools block to the high needs block, and if needed, the option was to extend the programme for another year. There were issues with the high number of independent schools still being used and not enough places in Mainstream Schools. Conversations took with the DfE, and they have agreed to pay the funding for this year. Guidance had yet to be issued on continuation of the statutory override beyond March 2026 and there was potential that the outstanding deficit in March 2026 would transfer to the Councils General Fund. Medway's Safety Valve Improvement Plans were performing better than a number of other Local Authorities who were in the same programme and as a result there was a lot of pressure being put on the DfE to extend the statutory override for a further period. Medway's deficit would be significantly lower by March 2026.

**Eden House-** Clarification was sought on the £500k pressure due to delay in opening and the number of young people placed. Clarification was also sought on the number of beds there as it was assumed that there was capacity for six young people with a further two for independent accommodation.

The Committee was informed that there were five beds in Eden House. Originally committed to getting four young people placed but due to the delay in opening, the agreement was to have three young people there by the end of the financial year and were on target to achieve that. There were some vacancies in the staffing team, which was being addressed, this was a challenge in the market with residential support workers in high demand.

There was ample staff in place to manage the 3 young people and one additional staff had since been recruited. An Ofsted inspection was expected to take place in the summer given date of registration. Regular Regulation 44 visits from an independent continue to take place which had all been positive. There was additional funding in place to refurbish the Cabin which would produce a further provision and at that time the statement of purpose would be revisited to explore unitisation by looking at pressures against sufficiency strategy.



The Committee learned that at any given point there were different matrix for the number of residents as it had the capacity for seven young people. The national picture was that a children's home of that size was not good practice and to move away from large settings to personalised child focused provision.

### **Decision:**

- a) The Committee noted the results of the third round of revenue budget monitoring for 2024/25.
- b) The Committee noted that Cabinet instructed the Corporate Management Team to implement urgent actions to bring expenditure back within the budget agreed by the Full Council.

## **742 Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report and Strategic Risk Summary - Quarter 3 2024/25**

### **Discussion:**

The Committee received a report which summarised performance of delivery in Quarter 3 2024/25 of the Councils performance against its priorities as set out in the One Medway Council Plan.

The format of the data presented was commended for being clear and easy to understand.

Concern was raised at the number of red risks, and it was asked how they would be addressed. The Committee was informed that the previous targets presented were transactional and were chosen to deliver against due to the position of Children's Social Care at that time. The targets presented with now were not transactional and were longer range targets for which measures of improvement would take time to be realised.

### **Decision:**

- a) The Committee noted the Q3 2024/25 progress of the performance indicators used to monitor progress of the Council's priorities, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.
- b) The Committee noted the Strategic Risk Summary as set out in Appendix 2 to the report.

## **743 Work programme**

### **Discussion:**

The work programme was presented for information. Members were informed that the June 2025 meeting would have a housing focus and some of the comments made during today's meeting regarding accommodation for care

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leavers as well as children in temporary accommodation would be fed back to the team ahead of the June 2025 meeting,

It was asked that consideration be given to inviting the Integrated Care Board to a future meeting.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the report, agreed the work programme as set out at Appendix 1 to the report, and accepted the proposed changes, outlined in italic text on Appendix 1.

### **Chairperson**

### **Date:**

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