

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

Thursday, 7 August 2025

6.30pm to 9.23pm

Record of the meeting

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

Present: Councillors: Mandaracas (Vice-Chairperson), Animashaun, Gilbourne, Gulvin, Hamandishe, Jackson and Joy

Added members without voting rights:

Lisa Scarrott (Medway Parent and Carers Forum)

Substitutes:

Councillors:
Crozer (Substitute for Mrs Turpin)
McDonald (Substitute for Howcroft-Scott)
Peake (Substitute for Hubbard)
Perfect (Substitute for Spring)
Shokar (Substitute for Nestorova)

In Attendance:

Maria Beaney, Finance Business Partner, Education
Celia Buxton, Assistant Director, Education and SEND
Kelly Cogger, Director Children's Social Care
Rebecca Cooper, Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance
Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer
Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive
Adrian Hall, Head of Education Access
Amanda Harris, IRO Manager
Andrada Pepenel, Head of Provider Services
Mark Powell, Youth Justice Service Manager
Nicoleta Stangu, Head of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Youth Offending
Andy McNally-Johnson, Head of Corporate Accounts

196 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Howcroft-Scott, Hubbard, Nestorova, Spring and Mrs Turpin.

Apologies for absence were also received from Alice Pledger, Teacher Representative, Lenny Williams, Church of England Diocese Representative and Medway Youth Council.

197 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 11 June 2025 was agreed and signed as correct.

198 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

199 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

There were none.

Other interests

Councillor Crozer declared under item 7 that his grandchildren attended an Independent School.

Councillor Gulvin declared under item 6c that he was a member of the Fostering Panel.

Councillor Hamandishe declared under item 7 that his child attended an Independent School.

Councillor Jackson declared under item 6c that she was a member of the Fostering Panel.

Councillor McDonald declared under item 6c that he was a member of the Fostering Panel.

200 Meeting Theme: Children's Social Care

The Committee received a presentation on the items under this theme. The presentation included an update of the Ofsted Focused Visit.

The Committee was informed of the outcome of the most recent focused visit and that there were no priority actions issued. Ofsted noted that the service continued to prioritise the areas for continuous improvement and that the service tracking system was one of the best seen in the country. Work with key partners remained crucial to the progress of the improvement journey. Workforce recruitment and retention continued to be a priority, with a number of staff returning to work for Medway Council. There had also been an overall reduction in caseloads.

It was commented that the focused visit outcome was encouraging and the journey to outstanding was continuing at pace. It was commented that it was vital that the Committee continued to track the areas of improvement and as a result it was suggested and agreed that a Children's Social Care improvement report be added to the work programme to be presented on a quarterly basis.

Discussions and decisions of the other items under this theme can be found at minute numbers 200a – 200b.

a Medway Youth Justice Plan 2025 - 2026

Discussion:

The Committee received a presentation and the annual report which set out how youth justice would be delivered locally. This new plan was developed in line with the new guidance that was distributed to Local Authorities in March 2024.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

The Team was commended for the work being undertaken in addressing re offending rates

Prevention - it was commented that over the years, there had been funding cuts to budgets which negatively impacted the ability to implement preventative measures, and it was asked what was being done to address issues despite reduction in funding. It was also commented that it was vital that community groups affected were held accountable and that families take ownership of issues with youth offending. Additionally, future reports presented to the Committee detail preventative measures alongside outcomes and not to just provide headlines of what was or was not working.

Members were informed that Medway was in a good position, had an outstanding youth team whose priority was a focus on prevention, by targeting and working with children that they had concerns about before they came into the youth justice system.

Workforce – in response to a question on what was being done to further mitigate issues locally amidst national challenges, the Committee was informed that this was an area of continuous focus. There had been an increase in staff within the team and there were currently plans in place to recruit a second team manager to focus specifically on quality assurance. There was ongoing investment in upskilling the workforce, retention of staff and building relationships with partners.

Victim Support - it was asked what conversations were taking place with partners on the views of victims and the Committee was informed that this would be the focus of the next report. The Assistant Director of Education and SEND confirmed that as Chair of the Community Partnership Board, a review

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of the service had been undertaken as well as a review of the Terms of Reference and training for Board Members, to ensure that they understood their roles. Victim support was a priority on the agenda for the Community Partnership Board as it was important to have victims at the heart of the service and work being carried out.

Disproportionality - it was asked what was being done to educate all to recognise and address issues and to understand all the characteristics that fall under this umbrella. The Committee was informed that there was continuous extensive work undertaken with families as it was vital to view young people as a whole package and not insulation. There was also a comprehensive assessment tool in place to assist officers with their work. There was work undertaken on development of plans around the young person, plans which set goals and objectives and there was ongoing work with parental support of the plan, and making sure they understood the experiences of young people. It was important to note that whilst often parents can be a risk factor in a young person offending, they were also a huge preventative factor, so it was important to secure their support with the plans.

Not in Education Employment or Training - it was asked what was being done to address issues with offending in young people and the Committee was informed that this was a national challenge. The service had submitted a bid for additional funding to enable them, to work with a number of schools on different areas that may contribute to offending such as prevention of repeated suspension. The team currently provided support to children that had fallen out of the school realm and also worked with virtual schools to provide support for families.

Decision:

- a) The Children and Young People Overview & Scrutiny noted the Medway Youth Justice Plan 2025 - 2026, as set out at Appendix 1, to Cabinet.
- b) The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend Full Council to approve the Medway Youth Justice Plan 2025 – 2026.
- c) A briefing note be provided to the Committee on Disproportionality.

b Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2024-2025

Discussion:

The Committee received the report which detailed the Independent Reviewing Officer service activity for the period 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

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The work being undertaken by the service was praised and the impact of the Mockingbird Model was also commended.

Independence- it was asked how independent the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) were and the Committee was informed that had previously been discussed as to whether IROs should be external and it was concluded that this was not required. Due to the culture in Medway, IROs were able and confident to challenge and there has been occasions where they had not agreed with local authority plans and had challenged appropriately. They were able to seek independent legal advice if deemed necessary. They assisted children to make complaints if they wished to, they collaborated with children's guardians and also liaised with Cafcass.

The Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive added that Medway's IROs operated on an extremely independent basis, they did not report on the operational side of service. They were confident and able to undertake their role without fear of failure, and they provided a good, robust second layer of quality assurance.

Care Planning - in response to a question on what the aspirations were in terms of accountability of care planning, the Committee was informed that currently care plans were shared across multiple partners and services had their own care plans. The aspiration was for a standalone care plan that was not attached to a social care plan, for the plan to be more child and user friendly and that children and young people remained central to production of the plans.

Decision:

The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the IRO Service Annual Report 2024-2025.

c Children's Services Annual Fostering Report 2024-2025

Discussion:

The Committee considered the report which detailed activities of the fostering service during 2024-2025. The report also highlighted the aims and objectives of the service for the 2025/2026 financial year.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

- The team was commended for the professionalism of social workers and quality of reports presented to the fostering panel which were of high standards.
- Foster carers were praised for the commitment, dedication, love, and stability given to children.
- The Mocking Bird programme was also commended for being transformative and valuable to carers and children.

Foster carers - in response to a question regarding the demand, conversion rates and training for foster carers, the Committee learnt that nationally there was a large demand for foster carers. There had been a decrease in the last three years of prospective carers coming through, this continued to be a challenge locally which led to the decision to join up with the South East alliance to recruit jointly. The training offer for foster carers was in place to provide carers with skills to deliver the best care for children, this included access to training offers from health and education partners. Foster carers embarked on a rigorous journey to becoming carers which was underpinned by fostering regulations and unfortunately some carers did not complete the process for various reasons. There were currently approximately 500 children in care with 100 foster caring households. The team continued to work extensively to increase numbers, with the aspiration for all children to be placed locally.

Special guardianship - it was asked whether the 13 conversions to special guardianship orders referenced in the report were as a result of placements with close family members and the Committee was informed that the cases referred to in the report were instances where children had been placed with close extended family members or family friends.

Support - it was asked what support was made available when a carer ceased to be a local authority foster carer and became a special guardian. The Committee learnt that carers continued to be able to access support through the Kinship team. They were able to access training support as well as any additional needs support for the young person such as therapy or counselling. The focus for the coming year for the team was to develop the local offer through the Kinship team.

It was asked what the comparison was between the in-house and independent fostering agencies in terms of the financial offer, and the Committee was informed that there was a difference between the financial offer and as a result the policy had been reviewed, would continue to be reviewed on a yearly basis to provide better incentives for carers.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

201 Member's Item: Implications of removal of exemption from VAT for Private and Independent Schools in Medway from January 2025

Discussion:

The Committee received the report which provided a response to the Member's item, concerning the implications of removal of VAT exemption for independent schools in Medway from January 2025.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

It was important to note that the closure of Bryony was not due to implementation of VAT.

Contact - it was asked what was known about the families that had not been in contact with the Council and the Committee was informed that the team had been provided with details of the families that had not been in contact and there was still some work to be done in that area.

It was added that independent schools were a private businesses and did not have to provide the local authority with details of their pupils. The Council was notified of Bryony's closure by the school and the department were able to provide information to parents, so that they were aware of what support was available.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill changes would enable the local authority to have a clearer overview of all children regardless of the provision that they were in.

Decision:

The Committee noted the Director's comments in response to the Member's item.

202 The Proposed Changes to the Education Travel Assistance Policy and Post-16 Transport Policy Statement - Outcome Following Consultation

The Committee considered the report which detailed the outcomes of the consultation period on the Council's proposals to make changes to the Education Travel Assistance Policy, and Post-16 Transport Policy Statement with effect from 1 September 2025 and 1 September 2026 respectively.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

There was support for the proposed changes and it was acknowledged that embarking of change was often difficult, but it was important to balance making political decisions alongside the needs of the community.

Concern was expressed by a Member with the removal of Councillors as panel members.

It was asked what the process of implementation was, how feedback would be gathered on progress and whether panel members would not be from the School Transport Team. The Committee was informed that the changes being proposed were to align the process with statutory guidance. There would be no changes in the process as the Democratic Services Team would still be responsible for discharging all administrative duties related to the appeals, The Legal Team would continue to support panel members with executing their statutory duties in the decision making process. It was expected that there would be a pool of panel members which would consist of senior officers from

across the people directorate and members would be drawn from this pool for each appeal date.

The team would continue to seek information from various departments, including the Special Educational needs Department as part of the decision making process.

The Assistant Director of Education and SEND added that the purpose of the proposed change was to ensure that applications would be processed quickly and efficiently and it was important to note that regardless of whom was on the panel, the expectation was for the policy to be applied correctly. There were minimal changes being made and the proposals was based on ensuring clarity in terms of the policy.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the report.
- b) The impact of the change to policy be monitored and reviewed over the next 12 months and an update report be brought back to the Committee on progress.
- c) Councillor Gulvin requested that his vote against the recommendations be recorded, in accordance with paragraph 12.6 of the Council Rules

203 Capital Budget Monitoring - Round 1 2025/26

Discussion:

The Committee received the report which presented the results of the first round of the Council's capital budget monitoring process for 2025/26. Across the Council, there was a projected underspend of £0.846million.

Within the remit of this Committee there was a projected underspend of £0.207million against the approved budget of £19.534million.

The Committee was informed that whilst it was difficult to find many savings, services across the Council continued to explore saving measures and best use of funding.

Decision:

The Committee noted the results of the first round of capital budget monitoring for 2025/26.

204 Revenue Budget Monitoring - Round 1 2025/26

Discussion:

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The Committee received the report which presented the results of the first round of the Council's revenue budget monitoring process for 2025/26. Across the Council, there was a projected overspend across the Council of £10.948million. The overall round one position was better than in recent years.

Within the remit of this Committee there was a projected Overspend of £4.5million.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

Funding - it was commented that when the forecast was made year on year, it was based on projections and it difficult to know exactly what would happen or any additional hidden costs that would affect the budget. There was a predicted education overspend of £1.2million and given the recent announcement by Government of an additional £1.5 billion funding for high dependency block, it was asked what percentage would be received by Medway and if it would be used against the £1.2 million deficit and reduce the Dedicated Support Grant (DSG) reserve deficit.

The Committee was informed that a percentage of the allocation was received, and the figures were factored into the forecast presented. There was however huge increases in demand in the high needs block and the grant funding was ring fenced to the DSG and central spend and as a result cannot be used to cover the £1.2million deficit.

The Assistant Director of Education and SEND added that the overspend in education was due to the additional project to clear the backlog of Education Health Care Plans (EHCP) till the end of July 2025. This project has now been extended till December 2025 due to increase in requests for EHCP assessments received since May. The extension would also prevent the good work that had been completed on clearance of backlogs unravelling and remain in line with completion of assessments within statutory timeframes due to the significant increase.

The SEND reforms that were due to come in in the Autumn were highly anticipated, the ambiguity of those reforms appeared to have prompted the increase in requests for EHCPs nationally.

Risk– it was asked what action would be taken to ensure that we do not have high risk ratings in the future. The Committee was informed that this was the beginning of a robust budget process that would continue in the coming months and in the autumn, a draft budget would be presented. There was extensive work being undertaken in each department to ensure that we come out of the position of dependency on Exceptional Financial Support as quickly as possible. The finance department worked closely with services to ensure that forecasts were as accurate and robust as possible and there were allowances built into the forecasts for placements demand. Panels also scrutinised the placements forecast, and business cases were being explored to review expenditure and where further savings could be made.

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The knock on effects of Exceptional Financial Support was that a minimum revenue provision had to be set aside to repay and that had been built into all interest and financing forecasts to provide as robust a budget as possible for Medway. The children's directorate were demand led and when a need was presented, they had to be addressed. The focus was on trying to model the demand to remain as demand led as possible.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the results of the first round of revenue budget monitoring for 2025/26.
- b) The Committee noted that the Cabinet instructed the Corporate Management Team to implement urgent actions to bring expenditure back within the budget

205 Work programme

Discussion:

The Committee received the work programme. Members were informed of a workshop session to take place on 17 November 2025 on MS Team on Medway Safeguarding Children's Partnership.

Members were also informed that representatives of the Committee would attend the 20 August 2025 meeting of Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee where an item would be taken regarding the recent decision to award a new Integrated All Age Mental Health Services (IAAMHS) contract.

Decision:

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

Chairperson

Date:

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