

Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Glenfield on Tuesday, 2 September 2025.

PRESENT

Mr. M. Bools CC (in the Chair)

Mr. M. H. Charlesworth CC
Mrs. L. Danks CC
Mrs. K. Knight CC
Mr. J. McDonald CC
Mr. D. Page CC

Ms. A. Pendlebury CC
Mr. B. Piper CC
Mrs B. Seaton CC
Mr. C. A. Smith CC
Mrs D. Taylor CC

In attendance

Mr. C. Pugsley CC – Lead Member for Children and Families
Canon. C. Shoyer – Church of England Representative (online)
Dr. J. Bloxham CC – Scrutiny Commissioner (Agenda Item 8)
Mr. A. Innes CC – Scrutiny Commissioner (Agenda Item 8)
Mr. M. Mullaney CC – Scrutiny Commissioner (Agenda Item 8)

17. Minutes of the meeting held on 3 June 2025.

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 June 2025 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

18. Question Time.

The Chief Executive reported that no questions had been received under Standing Order 34.

19. Questions asked by members under Standing Order 7(3) and 7(5).

The Chief Executive reported that no questions had been received under Standing Order 7(3) and 7(5).

20. To advise of any other items which the Chairman has decided to take as urgent elsewhere on the agenda.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

21. Declarations of interest in respect of items on the agenda.

The Chairman invited members who wished to do so to declare any interest in respect of items on the agenda for the meeting.

No declarations were made.

22. Declarations of the Party Whip in accordance with Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 16.

There were no declarations of the party whip.

23. Presentation of Petitions under Standing Order 35.

The Chief Executive reported that no petitions had been received under Standing Order 35.

24. Transforming SEND and Inclusion in Leicestershire (TSIL) Programme Summary and High Needs Block Update.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided a summary of the work and impact of the Transforming SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) and Inclusion in Leicestershire (TSIL) programme. It sets out the progress since the update considered by the Committee on 5 September 2024, programme impact and next steps, as well as an overview of the current High Needs Block financial position. A copy of the report, marked 'Agenda Item 8', is filed with these minutes.

The Scrutiny Commissioners were welcomed to the meeting for this item. The invitation was issued following a discussion on the TSIL Programme and the High Needs Block at the meeting of the Scrutiny Commission on 9 June 2025.

The Cabinet Lead Member for Children and Families stated that he was confident with the direction of travel set out within the report. The Service continued to operate within a challenging SEND environment and demand had spiked again this year. National reforms to children's social care would be announced in the Autumn which would then to be introduced locally. Despite continued challenges, he stated that the Department had managed to make progress, reduce backlogs and improve timeliness.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- (i) In response to a question regarding a £6,000 per pupil notional SEND funding amount, which had remained unchanged since its introduction in 2014 despite rising costs and increasing demand for SEND provision, the Director stated that if the Department for Education were to review the figure it would be expected to increase to around £10,500 per pupil.
- (ii) A question was raised relating to whether national reforms to children's social care were likely to have an impact on demand for EHCP's. The Director stated that it was not clear what would be set out within the reforms. Following announcement of the reforms in the Autumn, primary legislation would be required and there would then need to be a period of implementation both nationally and locally. It was therefore unlikely that the reforms would have an immediate impact on growth. As challenges in this area continued, the Department would continue to work with mainstream schools in order to further develop the strategy for supporting inclusion within mainstream schools, wherever possible. Members noted that this work would be undertaken through the Change Programme Partnership.
- (iii) With regards to the timeliness of the assessment process for EHCP assessment requests, performance in Leicestershire remained below the national average. The Director stated that process improvements had enabled the SENA service to reduce backlogs and improve timeliness. Members noted that a lack of capacity for educational psychologists had contributed towards delays in the assessment

process. The Department had developed a strategy for utilising alternative professionals to undertake elements of the assessment process, whilst educational psychologists would oversee the case. Work had also been undertaken with NHS partners to develop support for children who were waiting for a health assessment. The Department would also consider whether artificial intelligence (AI) could be utilised by the SENA service in order to reduce the time and resource required to process EHCP assessment information.

- (iv) The Department would aim to improve the understanding of the assessment process through improved communication with parents and schools. In addition to this, the Department would undertake work in order to build the confidence of parents and schools to consider whether a child could be successful within a mainstream school without an EHCP in place. Members noted that schools could use a range of inclusion support without the need for an EHCP. Improving knowledge and understanding of the assessment process and the different levels of support available for children could reduce the demand of requests for needs assessments.
- (v) Members noted that the Department continued to await an inspection under a revised SEND Local Area Inspection Framework. The Framework had been introduced by the Government in April 2024. As national reforms to children's social care would be announced in the Autumn, it was uncertain as to whether or not Ofsted would continue to deliver inspections under this Framework.
- (vi) With regards to complaints received by the SENA service, which had reduced by 70% from the previous year, the Director clarified that of the 446 complaints had been received relating to the Service, 72% had resulted in a fault found. The main themes of complaints received by the Service were complaints relating to decision making and delays in providing a service, as well as complaints relating to communication.
- (vii) Members noted that the Department had undertaken work in order to increase capacity within internal specialist schools as the places could often be delivered at a considerably lower cost than utilising independent schools. The Department would aim to further increase the number of internal specialist places through the development of an area based special school. However, the Director stated that increase levels of demand for specialist places continued to impact the supply of internal places.
- (viii) In response to concern raised regarding funding and demand pressures, members were assured that the Department would continue to undertake work in order to slow demand, improve the overall High Needs deficit position, and consider strategies for further improving internal service performance and inclusive practice across the SEND system. Members noted that rises in demand reinforced that the SEND system remained unsustainable. Uncertainty regarding what would be included within the White Paper proposed for release in Autumn 2025 was expected to continue to fuel demand until there was more clarity over proposed changes. The Director agreed that a report to update on progress with regards to SEND and inclusion, and the High Needs Block financial position, would be presented to the Committee at a future meeting.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the summary of the work and impact of the Transforming SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) and Inclusion in Leicestershire (TSIL) programme, the progress since the update considered by the Committee on 5 September 2024, programme impact and next steps, as well as an overview of the current High Needs Block financial position, be noted.
- (b) That the Director of Children and Family Services be requested to provide the Committee with an update on SEND and inclusion, and the High Needs Block financial position, at a future meeting.

25. Children's Social Care Statutory Complaints and Compliments Annual Report 2024-25.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided a summary of the Children's Social Care Statutory Complaints and Compliments Annual Report for 2024/25. A copy of the report, marked "Agenda Item 9", is filed with these minutes.

The Lead Member for Children and Families stated all complaints received by the Department were of great importance and provided the opportunity for improvements in service delivery. He stated that he was regularly briefed on the main themes of the complaints and compliments received by the Department, as well as the work undertaken as a result. He assured members of his confidence that the Department would continue with its focus on delivering timely and clear communication to families, incorporating the feedback within both complaints and compliments.

In introducing the report, the Director stated that there were a number of errors in the data presented within the cover report. A member commented that the number of errors had made it difficult for the report to be fully understood. As a result of this, the Director agreed that the correct data would be published following the meeting.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- (i) Members noted that complaint cases had been utilised in order to make improvements within services. It was suggested that anonymous case studies could be provided alongside reports in order to illustrate how improvements had been undertaken. The Director agreed that case studies would be included with the next Children's Social Care Statutory Complaints and Compliments Annual Report.
- (ii) A question was raised as to whether members could be provided with information relating to cases whereby fault was found by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman following an investigation. The Director agreed to provide members with this information following the meeting.
- (iii) Concern was raised that only 58% of complaints at Stage 1 had been responded to within the statutory maximum period of 20 working days. The Director advised that there were a number of factors which could affect the length of time taken to respond to a complaint. The complexity of the case was often a factor for delay, in addition to the amount of time taken to arrange meetings between officers and complainants. Members were assured that regular communication with complainants continued to be undertaken throughout the complaint process, and this included an explanation for any delay in response.

- (iv) Members noted that service users were asked to provide feedback on services. This was either conducted via a survey or through conversations during and after intervention. The voice of children and families continued to form an essential element of the Department's continuous improvement plan.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the summary of the Children's Social Care Statutory Complaints and Compliments Annual Report for 2024/25, be noted.
- (b) That the Director of Children and Family Services be requested to publish correct data relating to errors contained within the report.
- (c) That the Director of Children and Family Services be requested to include case studies relating to the outcome of complaints, as part of a future annual report.
- (d) That the Director of Children and Family Services be requested to provide the Committee with information relating to complaints which had been investigated by the Local Government and Social care Ombudsman.

26. Children in Need of Help and Protection.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an overview of work in the Children and Family Department in relation to children within Leicestershire that require Help and Protection. A copy of the report, marked 'Agenda Item 10', is filed with these minutes.

The Lead Member for Children and Families stated that the Service continued to undertake vital and complex work in order to ensure that the correct support was provided to children at the correct time.

In response to a question regarding access to the Disabled Children's Service, the Director advised that the Council had specific responsibilities to ensure that the needs of a disabled children were met. Families and professionals could make a referral for any child through the Council's Front Door. The First Response Team would then undertake an initial assessment in order to determine the correct level of support for a child. Support services would be provided by different services from across the Department, such as the Disabled Children's Service or the Targeted Early Help Team. Members noted that both families and professionals would be involved in those assessments.

RESOLVED:

That the overview of work in undertaken the Children and Family Department in relation to children within Leicestershire that require Help and Protection be noted.

27. Leicestershire Music Overview Report.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided the latest achievements and impact, as well as the funding and governance arrangements for Leicestershire Music, as the Lead organisation for the Leicestershire Music Hub. A copy of the report, marked 'Agenda Item 11', is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- (i) Members were pleased with the work undertaken by the Service in delivering music education programmes which benefited children in a number of ways such as developing creativity, cognitive skills, social connections, and overall wellbeing. The Director agreed that the Committee would be provided with an invitation to Leicestershire Music performances and that a report on the work delivered by the Service would be presented to the Committee on an annual basis.
- (ii) In response to concern relating to funding, the Director assured members that the Service would continue to deliver music education programmes but that some efficiencies would need to be undertaken. The Service was in receipt of a core funding grant which had not increased for the 2025-26 academic year and had only increased by 4.61% since 2015-16. In addition to this, the Local Government Pay Award for 2024/25 was unfunded and would have an impact on the budget. In order to make efficiencies, the Service had undertaken a staffing restructure and could, as the Hub lead, reduce the amount of funding it provided to partner organisations. Members noted that reducing the amount of funding provided to partners could have an impact on specialist services which delivered programmes to groups of children such as those with SEND.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the latest achievements and impact, as well as the funding and governance arrangements for Leicestershire Music, as the Lead organisation for the Leicestershire Music Hub, be noted.
- (b) That the Director of Children and Family Services be requested to provide the Committee with an invitation to Leicestershire Music performances.
- (c) That the Director of Children and Family Services be requested to provide the Committee with a report on the Leicestershire Music service annually.

28. Quarter 1 2025-26 Performance Report.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an update on the Children and Family Services Department's performance for the period April to June 2025 (Quarter 1). A copy of the report, marked 'Agenda Item 12', is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- (i) A question was raised regarding the requirement for additional schools and school places. The Director stated that housing development programmes across the County continued to increase demand for school places. The Department would continue to utilise developer contributions so that the financial burden would not affect the Council's capital budget. In addition to this, it was developing a School Place Strategy which would outline capacity and sufficient challenges. Members would continue to be invited to attend briefings on school places relevant to their localities.
- (ii) It was expected that Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) could impact school place sufficiency. LGR would require two-tier areas, such as Leicestershire, and neighbouring small unitary areas to set out plans for a joint programme of

devolution and local government reorganisation. It was not yet clear what the outcome of reorganisation in Leicestershire would be. However, as all local authorities had a duty to provide a sufficient number of school places, a strategy to review school places would be required as part of any reorganisation model.

- (iii) With regards to the number of children who were electively home educated (EHE), the Director stated that this number continued to increase in line with a national trend. The Department continued to monitor the reasons for EHE and it worked with families to support their decision. The Director agreed to provide members with an overview of the reasons for EHE as part of a future report relating to Inclusion.
- (iv) A question was asked regarding a reduction in the number of eligible children which took up their Free Early Education Entitlement (FEEE) offer. The Director stated that there was a challenge relating to there being an insufficient number of places for children with SEND in two particular areas. In order to address the issue, the Service continued to work with parents in order to access alternative placements and would consider how in-house nurseries could be made more inclusive. A social media campaign was being delivered which encouraged parents to check their FEEE entitlement and the offer was also being advertised within Family Hubs.
- (v) In response to concern relating to the number of fixed term suspensions, the Director assured members that the Department provided an outreach service which worked with children and families through alternative provision, as well as exploring ways in which children could be supported back into school and prevent further suspensions. Members noted that additional work in this area would be delivered through the SEND Investment Fund.
- (vi) Members noted that there were a limited number of post-16 pathways for children and young people. Members noted that the Department had recruited a post-16 service manager who would evaluate the post-16 offer across the county. It was anticipated that more entry-level courses, supported internships and vocational opportunities would be required to ensure an inclusive post-16 offer.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the update on the Children and Family Services Department's performance for the period April to June 2025 (Quarter 1), be noted.
- (b) That the Director of Children and Family Services be requested to include a breakdown of reasons for which parents had chosen to electively home educate children within a future report relating to inclusion.

29. Draft Leicestershire and Rutland Safeguarding Children Partnership Yearly Report 2024-25.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which sought views on the draft Yearly Report of the Leicestershire and Rutland Safeguarding Children Partnership (LRSCP) for 2024-25. A copy of the report, marked 'Agenda Item 13', is filed with these minutes.

The Cabinet Lead Member for Children and Family Services emphasised that the reported demonstrated both the scale and the seriousness of safeguarding and highlighted the importance of early intervention.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- (i) The Director explained that local authorities and statutory safeguarding partners had both a statutory obligation and a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children. This included the reporting of safeguarding concerns. Elected Members also had a duty as corporate parents. In terms of the wider responsibility for safeguarding, the Department regularly undertook work through safeguarding partnerships on recognising the signs of abuse and campaigns focussed on helping communities to identify children at risk of abuse.
- (ii) In response to a question regarding group based sexual exploitation, the Director advised that it could not be possible to state that such activity was not taking place at any given time. However, members were assured that whilst the Director was not aware of any ongoing investigations or high-profile incidents relating to large scale grooming gangs in Leicestershire, robust methods of identification and monitoring continued to be utilised in order to respond to instances whereby exploitation was suspected and to support children at risk of exploitation.
- (iii) With regards to health information sessions which had been delivered by doctors and other healthcare professional within Family Hubs, members noted that the sessions had been piloted within a specific location in order to prevent unnecessary GP referrals relating to specific health issues. The sessions had a positive outcome, but it was not clear whether the sessions had been delivered in Family Hubs in additional locations. Members noted that the Director would discuss with the Service the approach for ongoing delivery.
- (iv) Concern was raised regarding the sustainability of funding for the Partnership's work, as a shortfall had been reported. This shortfall had been made up from reserves. The Director stated that funding arrangements for the Partnership continued to be reviewed on an annual basis. Members received assurance that as part of the local implementation of national reforms to children's social care, the Department would review whether service delivery could be undertaken more efficiently. If savings could not be delivered within the Department, negotiations with partners regarding contributions would take place in order to address the shortfall in funding.
- (v) Members noted that a Race, Ethnicity and Excellence Forum (REEF) had been established in order to ensure that the best level of support was being provided to children from Black, Asian or Multi Ethnic backgrounds. The additional safeguarding needs of this group needed to be considered as a result of intersectionality, racism or discrimination. The forum allowed staff across the Department to bring cases to discuss in order to ensure the needs of black, Asian and Multi Ethnic children and young people were being fully considered and to analyse broader issues relating to race which could impact on safeguarding children.
- (vi) In response to a question asked of the Lead Member for Children and Families regarding his support for the work undertaken by the REEF, he stated that his most important priority as designated Lead Member for Children and Young People was that all children, regardless of background, were safeguarded. He assured members that he supported the best interests of all children and that this was fundamental in ensuring that he and the Director of Children and Family Services delivered their safeguarding responsibilities.

- (vii) With regards to the Partnership's priorities for 2025-27, members noted that work focusing on child exploitation would be delivered as part of work to be delivered as part of Harm Outside the Home. The Director stated that this would be made clearly within the final version of the Leicestershire & Rutland Safeguarding Children Partnership Yearly Report 2024-25.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the draft yearly report assessing the impact of the work undertaken in 2024/25 on safeguarding outcomes for children in Leicestershire and Rutland be noted.
- (b) That the views expressed by the Committee would be presented to the Cabinet at its meeting on 12 September 2025.

30. Independent Reviewing Officer Service Annual Report 2024 – 2025.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided a summary and contents of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report for 2024 – 2025. A copy of the report, marked 'Agenda Item 14', is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- (i) In response to a question regarding the number of children which had participated in the review process, members noted that the number had remained relatively high over recent years. The Director highlighted that 92% of children contributed to their review, which represented a slight decrease from the 2023/24, when 93.056% of children contributed. The participation rate in 2022/23 was 90.84%.
- (ii) A question was asked of the Lead Member for Children and Families, relating to the commitment of the IRO in strengthening practice around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in terms of developing knowledge and understanding and becoming more culturally competent in practice. The Lead Member stated that he was focussed on ensuring that the best quality of service was provided to all children.
- (iii) Members noted that the Department was focussed on ensuring the correct support for children, and that in some cases this would result in individual decisions being made for individual children. The Service would continue to deliver the best support available for different groups of children and ensure that all children were kept safe from harm.

RESOLVED:

That the summary and contents of the Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report for 2024 – 2025, be noted.

31. Date of next meeting.

RESOLVED:

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 4 November at 14:00.

2.00 - 4.26 pm
02 September 2025

CHAIRMAN