

Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Glenfield on Tuesday, 20 January 2026.

PRESENT

Mr. M. Bools CC (in the Chair)

Mr. J. Boam CC
Mr. N. Chapman CC
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
Mr. K. Robinson CC
Mrs B. Seaton CC
Mrs D. Taylor CC

1. Minutes of the previous meeting.

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2025 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

2. Question Time.

The Chief Executive reported that the following question had been received under Standing Order 34.

Question asked by Mrs Sue Whiting:

“Could the chair please state:

- a) How many care leavers 16-18 are not in education employment or training?
- b) How many care leavers 18-25 are not in education employment or training?
- c) What provisions are available for any care leavers who are not in education, employment or training?”

Response by the Chairman:

- a) There are currently 273 care experienced young people in Education, Employment and Training (EET) and 210 not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET).
- b) There are currently 18 care experienced young people in this age group, who choose to be in contact and have active involvement with the Service, who are EET and 24 who are NEET.
- c) The Department provides a post-16 Personal Education Plan (PEP) for all care leavers who are NEET and maintain a contact list for NEET care leaving young people, to offer options and encourage their return to education or employment. The

virtual school works closely with personal advisers and social workers to stay connected with care leavers.

For 18+ care leavers not in employment, education or training, the Service links in with Leicestershire Cares who provide mentoring support to build confidence in returning to work, and for those young people coming out of custody along with the Probation service, this includes volunteering opportunities as well. Connect to Work is the DWP programme which as part of its priorities is to support care leavers into employment. The Service also works with Reed who support interview skills and CV work for care leavers to support them into work.

Mrs Sue Whiting asked the following Supplementary question:

“Thank you for a comprehensive answer to my question. For clarification is it possible to state:

- a) How many of the 24 NEET care experienced young people in the 18-25 age group have been in custody?
- b) Have their learning needs been fully assessed since leaving custody?”

Response to the supplementary question:

At the invitation of the Chairman, the Director of Children and Family Services indicated that this information would be provided to Mrs Whiting after the meeting.

3. Questions asked by members.

The Chief Executive reported that two questions had been received under Standing Order 7(3) and 7(5).

Question asked by Mr Andrew Innes CC:

“A bid was recently put in by Discovery Trust to Loughborough College to use the existing Melton campus site (which includes the Theatre) as a venue for post 16 special educational needs provision. I understand that LCC has also been in similar discussions about the use of this site with other providers. We do not have adequate facilities in Leicestershire to accommodate post 16 requirements, and therefore we spend a large amount of money moving our residents around county or outside of county. To have such a provision, in a ready-made campus in Melton Mowbray, under these circumstances makes sense, not just commercially, but also to provide high quality services for some of our most vulnerable residents. I would also point out that this could also act as a catalyst to save the popular Melton Theatre that is in serious threat of closure due to Loughborough College withdrawing support, and their wish to sell the site. I would like to ask:

- a) What discussions have taken place, has there been any progress in these discussions?
- b) What is Leicestershire County Council’s view on commissioning post 16 provision?
- c) Should the Council be having serious talks with providers and Loughborough College about the future use of these facilities?

It is our duty to our residents to make sure we have good quality, easy accessible provision, for all of our residents, and I would advocate that we look into these proposals seriously.”

Reply by the Chairman:

- a) The Council continues to recognise the importance of robust and effective planning for post 16 education and training, particularly for young people with additional needs. Leicestershire has a diverse educational landscape, including school sixth forms, colleges, and specialist institutions, and our approach remains firmly aligned with national policy direction and the principle of mainstream inclusion wherever appropriate.

The Council has held discussions with officers and key stakeholders in relation to post 16 SEND provision in Melton, including consideration of the Discovery Trust’s proposal. This included analysis of current and projected demand, cost, long-term viability, accessibility, suitability and sustainability of the proposed venue and alignment with both national policy and local strategic direction for post 16 SEND places.

Following this evaluation, the Council concluded that the proposal could not be pursued, primarily due to the low and stable number of young people with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) within the Melton area, the existence of alternative provision options and concerns about the appropriateness and sustainability of the site for the proposed purpose. The Discovery Trust has acknowledged that, whilst they accept the Council is unable to pursue a post 16 development, they indicated their intention to bring forward a revised proposal focusing on pre 16 specialist places. Officers will review any such proposal upon receipt and will ensure that stakeholders are kept informed.

- b) The Council remains firmly committed to improving post 16 pathways and outcomes for all young people, including those with SEND. This commitment includes ensuring the sufficiency of high quality, sustainable provision, supporting mainstream inclusion, consistent with national policy direction and strengthening transition pathways into an adulthood of independence, choice, and control. To support these aims, the Council has recently appointed a Post 16 Service Manager whose responsibilities are focussed on understanding and analysing local need, engaging with all post-16 providers, identifying any gaps in provision and leading the development of a county wide Post 16 strategy.
- c) The Council is open to engaging with providers, including Loughborough College, where proposals are viable, sustainable, and aligned with the Council’s strategic direction for inclusive education. While the decision about the future use of the Melton campus rests with the College, the Council will continue to work constructively with partners where this supports improved sufficiency of appropriate local provision, good outcomes for children and young people and long term sustainability of educational pathways. Any discussions about the future of the site must therefore be grounded in demand analysis, strategic fit, and the feasibility of delivering high quality inclusive mainstream provision.

Question asked by Mrs Naomi Bottomley CC:

“I wish to ask a question with regards to the consultation ‘*Plans to provide more SEND nursery places in local communities*’.

The consultation proposals assume that mainstream Early Years settings can absorb specialist SEN provision, despite significant funding constraints, specialist workforce shortages, and an existing loss of childcare and specialist capacity. The consultation materials also appear to give limited visibility of these operational realities and risks.

In this context, how will the consultation process ensure that the feedback gathered is genuinely informed, balanced and valid?”

Reply by the Chairman:

The Early Years service provided by the County Council has a strong track record of working closely with the sector to promote careers in childcare, encouraging and supporting new staff to join the sector. The Service also ensures that new staff are highly skilled and trained, working closely with the Stronger Practice Hub funded by DfE to support professional development for staff working with young children across the County.

As part of the proposals, Early Years settings would be supported with a new, higher band of funding which would enable children to receive a higher ratio of adult to child support, allowing providers to pay staff at an increased rate which would support them to recruit and retain staff. Additional staff within the Early Years team would also provide additional training and support to ensure mainstream settings can meet the needs of those Early Years children with more complex additional needs and work with families in their homes.

The consultation process is open for all interested stakeholders to submit their views on the proposals and all responses submitted will be considered in a report to the Cabinet on 24th March 2026. Officers will ensure that the responses submitted through the consultation are reported in a fair and balanced way which supports members to make an informed and evidence based decision on the proposals.

Mrs. Naomi Bottomley CC asked the following supplementary question:

“While I appreciate that the proposal, and therefore the consultation around the proposal, suggests supporting providers with an uplift of up to £10 on top of the funded hours, what is the evidence that this would cover the costs of providing specialist support in more mainstream settings?”

If there is not robust data to support this, it calls into question the validity and the reliability of the consultation and the proposal as a whole.”

Response to the supplementary question:

At the invitation of the Chairman, the Director of Children and Family Services stated that within Leicestershire there were many children with significant and complex needs who were accessing mainstream early years provisions and that they were thriving in those settings. The proposals included additional offers of specialist training, additional early years staff, and additional funding bands for providers. Most children historically, and at the time, attended a specialist nursery on a dual placement basis where they also attended mainstream provision as well. He stated that this was not a cost saving proposal

and that modelling demonstrated that funding would allow childcare settings to provide one-to-one support where needed in order to ensure the best outcomes for children in those placements. The Department would aim to ensure families were given an equitable offer to use their free early education entitlement hours ways which suited them. This could include longer days or time during the holidays, which many providers also offered. The consultation would give everybody the opportunity to give their views on proposals and would help the Department to plan next steps.

4. Urgent Items.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

5. Declarations of interest.

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.

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

There were no declarations of the party whip.

7. Presentation of Petitions under Standing Order 35.

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

8. Medium Term Financial Strategy 2026/27 - 2029/30.

The Committee considered a joint report of the Director of Children and Family Services and the Director of Corporate Resources which provided information on the proposed 2026/27 – 2029/30 Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) as it related to the Children and Family Services department. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 8' is filed with these minutes.

The Chairman welcomed Mr. C. Pugsley CC, Lead Member for Children and Families, to the meeting for this item.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

Plans to provide more SEND nursery places in local communities.

- (i) Concern was raised regarding an ongoing consultation relating to proposals to create more accessible and inclusive SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) nursery places within communities, with particular reference to the potential loss of dedicated provision. The Director explained that the proposals sought to build local capacity so that children's needs could be met within their communities, and that proposed model would allow for expansion of specialist support through early years services. It was emphasised that the aim was to ensure equitable access to early years SEND provision across the county, as provision was often inconsistent.

- (ii) In relation to funding, the Director emphasised that the proposals were not intended as cost-saving measures and that all existing funding would be reinvested into early years provision in order to improve equity and capacity across the system. Consideration would be given to inflationary pressures, although this would remain subject to national funding decisions.
- (iii) Concerns were raised regarding the ability of mainstream settings to train teachers and support staff adequately, particularly where significant numbers of children had SEND needs but did not have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). A question was asked regarding which providers were being engaged to accommodate additional children with SEND and whether those settings had confirmed capacity to meet all aspects of need, including facilities for activities, resources, and the availability of additional staff. The Director stated that no specific providers had yet been identified to expand or replace provision, as further engagement with providers would be required should the proposals progress.
- (iv) Members remained concerned about the potential loss of dedicated SEND provision and that some mainstream settings could struggle to meet complex needs. The Director acknowledged the concern and reiterated their commitment to high-quality training, appropriate staffing ratios, and robust quality assurance. It was noted that whilst many children's needs could be met locally in mainstream provision, some children would continue to require different or more specialist support, and this would be recognised within the system.
- (v) With regards to the potential for legal challenge from parents relating to the Council's decisions with regards SEND provision, and whether this had been factored into the authority's risk management, the Director advised that the Council had not been challenged legally to date, however, SEND tribunals did occur. The Department was undertaking work to reduce the need for tribunal proceedings, whilst ensuring that decisions remained focused on meeting children's needs. Risk management would continue to form the development of any proposals.
- (vi) In response to a question regarding how growth in disabled children's services aligned with proposals to close a specialist nursery provision for children with disabilities. The Director explained that the disparity was due to different funding streams. Disabled children's services were funded from council resources, whereas specialist nurseries were funded from the High Needs/Early Years Blocks, which the Council was legally unable to supplement. Given increasing SEND demand and fixed resources, proposals aimed to utilise High Needs funding more effectively by moving to an alternative delivery model. This would broaden capacity, provide year round support, and embed specialist provision within local mainstream settings, an approach reported to be welcomed by many parents.
- (vii) In response to a question regarding whether similar proposals were anticipated relating to provision for older children within specialist settings, the Director outlined that mainstream inclusion was expected to be a key theme within the anticipated SEND White Paper and that the early years proposals aligned with this anticipated policy direction. However, it was not clear whether changes would be proposed for specialist school provision.
- (viii) With regards for staff training, a question was asked regarding whether Makaton would be taught in mainstream settings, whether this would be funded and trained for, and whether it would be delivered universally or selectively. The Director stated

that that an extensive training offer would be developed, potentially including Makaton, as well as earlier access to speech and language therapy, and greater flexibility in how support was delivered. This would include both one-to-one support where appropriate and broader system-wide training.

- (ix) It was noted that the consultation was due to run until 22 February 2026 and a report would be presented to the Committee at its meeting on 3 March as part of the consultation process. A detailed risk assessment would be developed for any proposals, including consideration of service pressures and mitigations, before being presented to the Cabinet.

Growth.

- (x) Concern was raised regarding an increase in the number of children entering care and placed in residential provision, a trend which continued to persist each year. The Director acknowledged that the number of children coming into care had increased, alongside rising residential costs driven largely by a national shortage of foster carers and limited availability of suitable family-based placements. The Director emphasised that residential care was not the default option and that foster care, including in-house and external placements, was always prioritised where appropriate. Work was ongoing to support and grow the foster carer cohort, strengthen kinship care through a dedicated strategy, and deliver the Family First partnership reforms to help children remain safely within their family networks wherever possible. It was noted that the development of in-house residential provision through the Children's Innovation Programme, in partnership with Barnardo's, which provided locally based homes exclusively for Leicester children, improved quality and continuity of care, and offered greater control over costs compared to private providers. All of these measures would also go towards supporting increasingly complex needs and higher levels of trauma experienced by children.
- (xi) A member asked a question relating to staff wellbeing within the Department as a result of increased workload and whether a new working arrangements policy for the Council was expected to place additional pressure on frontline staff. The Director stated that a range of support was available to staff, including structured supervision, workload management, training opportunities, clear wellbeing offers, and access to counselling for those working in particularly high-risk areas. It was noted that the proposed new working arrangements policy was not expected to have a significant negative impact, as the majority of frontline children's social care staff worked directly with children and families in the community.
- (xii) A question was asked regarding the cost of home to school transport, which had been identified as a service pressure on the Council's general budget. The Director outlined that funding for transport came from the core Council budget rather than the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and affected the budgets of both the Children and Family Services and Environment and Transport. The pressure had therefore been indicated across MTFS planning relating to both directorates in order to ensure visibility, reflecting that it is a corporate pressure arising from increased demand.

Savings.

- (xiii) Members were in agreement that there was very limited scope remaining for savings to be made within the Department. Similar financial and growth constraints had been present in previous years meaning that there was little remaining capacity for further reductions without impacting service delivery.
- (xiv) In relation to recruitment, which had been identified as a key area for savings, a question was asked regarding how feasible it was to attract high-quality applicants, particularly social workers, given national recruitment challenges and competition from other public sector organisations and the private sector. In response, the Director explained that recruitment challenges were not solely a local issue but reflected a national shortage of qualified and experienced social workers, particularly in frontline safeguarding roles. The most affected areas were identified as the front door and family safeguarding teams. It was noted that the issue was not simply one of attracting candidates but of limited supply nationally, particularly among those willing to remain in frontline statutory practice. The Director outlined that the Department had undertaken a range of actions in order to address workforce pressures.
- (xv) A question was asked regarding departmental goals and efficiency proposals and how far these differed from those in previous years. The Director stated that the areas identified by external advisors Newton Europe were already known and prioritised within the Service. The key challenge and focus of discussions with Newton Europe related to the additionality their involvement could provide, particularly through additional resource and specialist expertise, with the aim of accelerating improvements or increasing the scale of benefits rather than identifying entirely new areas for change.
- (xvi) In response to a question relating to where further efficiencies could be found, or whether service reductions were likely to be considered, the Lead Member advised that work was underway with Newton Europe in order to identify potential efficiency savings. He provided assurances that his priority was to avoid service cuts wherever possible and confirmed that as more information became available regarding efficiency opportunities, this would be communicated to the Committee.

Dedicated Schools Grant.

- (xvii) Members raised concern regarding significant overspend on high-cost placements and that the level of expenditure was unsustainable. The Director acknowledged this concern and emphasised the need for clearer and more decisive government guidance and intervention. It was noted that the Council had limited ability to influence many of the cost pressures presented.

Capital Programme.

- (xviii) A question was asked regarding the Children's Innovation Partnership with Barnardo's whereby in-house residential care services had been designed in, and were delivered through, a partnership arrangement. The Director stated that the work had prioritised bringing existing agreed homes into operation and ensuring they were fully established. It was explained that the Council was pursuing a mixed-economy approach, including agreements with other providers to avoid over-reliance on a single delivery model. Regulated and registered provision offered better value and safeguards than some unregulated alternatives. It was noted that any opportunity for additional funding would be pursued if available.

- (xix) Concern was raised regarding the cost and risks associated with unregulated social care provision and that some providers could be profiting excessively at the Council's expense. Members were in agreement that there was need for a more robust and highly regulated system.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report regarding the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2026/27 – 2029/30 and information now provided be noted;
- (b) That the comments now made be forwarded to the Scrutiny Commission for consideration at its meeting on 28 January 2026.

9. Draft Children and Family Services Departmental Plan 2026-2029.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services the draft Leicestershire Children and Family Service Departmental Plan 2026 – 29. A copy of the report, marked 'Agenda Item 9', is filed with these minutes.

The Lead Member for Children and Families stated that the draft policy set out a clear and compelling vision for the Department to support children and families. He placed on record his thanks to officers who had been involved in developed the draft Policy and highlighted the extensive engagement that had been undertaken with children, young people and families.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- (i) In response to a question asked, the Director confirmed that all of the partners and stakeholders involved in the development of the draft Plan had confirmed that they were commitment to it.
- (ii) The Director outlined that the development of an accompanying action plan, which would be utilised to track progress against outcomes, was near completion. At the request of members, the Director agreed that an update on progress made against the Action Plan would be presented to the Committee at the meeting on 1 September 2026.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the draft Leicestershire Children and Family Service Departmental Plan 2026 – 29, be noted.
- (b) That the comments now made be forwarded to the Cabinet for consideration at its meeting on 3 February 2026.
- (c) That the Director of Children and Family Services be requested to provide the Committee with an update on progress made against an action plan relating to the Leicestershire Children and Family Service Departmental Plan 2026 – 29, at the meeting on 1 September 2026.

10. School Places Strategy 2026-2031.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Families which outlined the draft School Places Strategy 2026–2031. The Strategy set out how the Council would meet its statutory duties to ensure a sufficient high quality school places in Leicestershire, delivered in the right place, at the right time. A copy of the report, marked 'Agenda Item 10', is filed with these minutes.

The Lead Member for Children and Families thanking the officers for the depth of work which had gone into underpinning the Strategy. He emphasised that every child having access to a suitable local school place was one of the Council's most fundamental responsibilities. He stated that the strategy demonstrated clearly, and with an evidence-based approach, that the Council would be able to meet both the mainstream and the specialist. However, he recognised that the Department would face significant challenges in delivering against the Strategy.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- (i) A question was raised regarding whether Section 106 funds could be used in order to support SEND schools and dedicated SEND places. The Director stated that a new planning obligations policy was being developed in order to ensure that Section 106 agreements reflected construction cost, including inflation, and allowed greater flexibility in utilising funds alternatively, as demographic demands changed. Increasing flexibility would support the utilisation of funds for SEND provision, including in mainstream settings.
- (ii) With regards to the approach to strategic planning of school places in relation to housing growth, a member asked how the Council planned for demand and whether the Authority, or developers, typically initiated proposals for new schools. The Director outlined that the Department continued to undertake planning by analysing live births, GP registrations, migration data, and ten-year secondary projections. The fundings of such analysis were then aligned with local plans which allowed for an early assessment of likely future school capacity needs. Whilst developers often favoured new schools, the Council's priority was to avoid destabilising existing provision, expanding existing schools where appropriate, and focussing on the importance of viable school size. Members noted that it was the Council's strategy that primary schools should not be built below two forms of entry, except where phased, and that secondary schools should be planned for a minimum of 900 places.
- (iii) Concerns raised regarding the sustainability of rural schools with particular focus on any potential closures and the impact on local communities. The Director provided assurance that a School Reorganisation Project was being established in order to assess sustainability across all schools, over a three-year period. It was anticipated that without action, deficits potentially totalling £45m–£50m could occur across vulnerable schools. It was anticipated that the equivalent of approximately 13 schools' worth of primary school capacity would need to be removed over time. However, no specific schools had been proposed for closure at this stage. Members noted that possible mitigation solutions included amalgamations, expansion or reconfiguration, linking infant and junior schools, and brokerage involving Multi-Academy Trusts. The Director agreed to provide the Committee with an update on the School Reorganisation Project, at a future meeting.
- (iv) Concern was also raised regarding secondary school capacity shortfall. It had been reported that around 2,000 additional places would be required within two years.

The Director stated that mitigation included schools expanding without capital works, existing capital projects, and new builds where required. Additional capital funding had been agreed by the Council to support these capacity requirements. The Director agreed to provide members with information relating to mitigation plans.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the draft School Places Strategy 2026–2031, which set out how the Council meets its statutory duties to ensure that there are sufficient high quality school places in Leicestershire are delivered in the right place, at the right time, be noted.
- (b) That the comments now made be forwarded to the Cabinet for consideration at its meeting on 3 February 2026.
- (c) That the Director be requested to provide the Committee with an update on the School Reorganisation Project, at a future meeting.
- (d) That the Director be requested to provide the Committee with information relating to mitigation plans relating to a secondary school capacity shortfall, at a future meeting.

11. Quarter 2 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 July to September 2025 (Quarter 2). A copy of the report, marked 'Agenda Item 11', is filed with these minutes.

The Lead Member for Children and Families states that the report presented a balanced picture of both a service which was operating under unprecedented financial pressure whilst also continuing to provide for the children and families. He wished to place on record his thanks to all of the staff across the Service for both their hard work and their continued dedication.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- (i) Members were pleased with clear improvements which had been demonstrated across the service, whilst acknowledging that further progress could still be made. A member stated that improved outcomes were particularly positive step given ongoing financial pressures and the nature of issues affecting some children and families.
- (ii) Concern was raised regarding Elective Home Education (EHE) as the number of children being electively home educated continued to rise. Particular concerns were raised regarding safeguarding, as home educated children could be less visible to services. The Director acknowledged that EHE remained an area of significant concern. While recognising that many families chose home education for positive reasons, others disengaged from the school system for more complex causes. Covid-19 was still having an impact for some children who had struggled to re-engage with schools. Members noted that increasing levels of need in classrooms nationally and locally presented challenges for schools. Initiatives such as Universal Design for Learning, which encouraged flexible teaching approaches which anticipate diverse learner needs, would go towards addressing this issue. The

Director outlined that a new Education Belonging Strategy would form an overarching framework relating to education improvement strategies. The Strategy aimed to ensure that children felt a sense of belonging within their school and the community. Work completed to date included a planned belonging conference in March 2026 and wider efforts in order to help schools meet a broader range of additional needs.

- (iii) A question was asked regarding the take-up of early years places, in relation to the extent of joint working with health professionals such as GPs and health visitors, who were often the first point of contact for new parents. The Director stated that health services had a duty to notify the authority where a child may have, or may develop, special educational needs, and strong working relationships existed between the Service and health visitors. Work was being undertaken in order to strengthen early years support further, including potential changes to the Service model in order to increase capacity, improve early engagement with families, and promote the benefits of early education.

RESOLVED:

That the update providing relating to the Children and Family Services Department's performance for the period July to September 2025 (Quarter 2), be noted.

12. Date of next meeting.

RESOLVED:

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 3 March at 14:00.

2.00 - 4.22 pm
20 January 2026

CHAIRMAN