

Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Glenfield on Tuesday, 3 March 2026.

PRESENT

Mr. M. Bools CC (in the Chair)

Mr. J. Boam CC	Mr. D. Page CC
Mr. N. Chapman CC	Ms. A. Pendlebury CC
Mr. M. H. Charlesworth CC	Mr. B. Piper CC
Mrs. L. Danks CC	Mr. K. Robinson CC
Mrs. K. Knight CC	Mrs B. Seaton CC
Mr. J. McDonald 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)

13. Minutes of the last meeting.

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 March 2026 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

14. Question Time.

The Chief Executive reported that the following question had been received under Standing Order 35:

Question asked by Adam Stares:

“In the previous MTFS (2025) the Children & Family Services department was set to make savings of £5.6million across five areas (CF1 to CF5) for the 2025/26 financial year.

Given that there is little over a month left in the current fiscal year has the Department delivered these savings / is it on track to do so, and how does this break down across the five sections?”

Response by the Chairman:

Children & Family Services has delivered savings in line with the £5.6m target set out in the 2025 MTFS for 2025/26. While delivery across the programme has been broadly on track, there has been variation within CF5 (Smarter Commissioning, Procurement and Demand Management). In particular, Strand 4 (Increased Partner Income) has under achieved against its in year target; however, this has been offset by over achievement in other CF5 strands.

Area	MTFS Target	Year End Forecast
CF1	-750	-750
CF2	-390	-390

CF3	-250	-250
CF4	-150	-150
CF5	-4,060	-4,060
	-5,600	-5,600

15. Questions asked by members.

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

16. Urgent Items.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

17. 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.

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

There were no declarations of the party whip.

19. Presentation of Petitions under Standing Order 33.

The Chief Executive reported that no petitions had been received under Standing Order 33.

20. Consultation on Expanding Community Based Support for Early Years Children with Additional Needs.

The Committee was due to consider a report of the Director of Children and Family Services regarding proposals relating to SEND Early Years provision. The purpose of the report was to seek the views of the Committee as part of the consultation relating to the proposals. The feedback was then to be presented to the Cabinet for its consideration, at its meeting on 24 March 2026. A copy of the report, marked 'Agenda Item 8', is filed with these minutes.

The original proposals aimed to create more accessible and inclusive SEND nursery places closer to home, reduce long journeys for young children and increase funding for specialist places within mainstream nurseries. Under the proposed plans, places at four specialist nurseries would no longer have been commissioned.

On 27 February 2026, the Leader of the County Council published a statement outlining that following the conclusion of the consultation, the Director of Children and Family Services, following discussion with the Cabinet Lead Member for Children and Families, had decided not to proceed with the proposals. As such, the Cabinet would no longer consider the proposals at its meeting in March.

Given that the proposals would no longer be considered by the Cabinet, there was, consequently, no matter for the Committee to provide comment on at this meeting. The report was therefore withdrawn and no debate on the matter took place.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman stated that he recognised the dissatisfaction and strong concern expressed by parents, carers, and professionals. Therefore, in consultation with the Committee Spokespersons and the Director, he had agreed, prior to the meeting, that a report relating to the consultation should be considered by the Committee at a future meeting in order to provide an opportunity for scrutiny on the matter. The Chairman went on to thank all of those who had shared their views over the consultation period.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report seeking views of the Committee relating to proposals regarding SEND Early Years provision, be withdrawn.
- (b) That a report relating to the consultation regarding SEND Early Years provision be considered by the Committee at a future meeting.

21. Building Education Services Together: Programme Plan.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an overview of the Building Education Services Together (BEST) programme plan and provided information relating to the development of a Belonging in Education Strategy. A copy of the report, marked 'Agenda Item 9', is filed with these minutes.

The Lead Member for Children and Families emphasised that the program plan presented a clear, well-structured approach to strengthening education services. In addition, that the Plan demonstrated strong partnership working which focussed on improved delivery for all children across the County.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- (i) With regards to a statement within the report which outlined that children and young people with SEND should be able to learn at a school or college close to their home, a member asked whether the provision selected would be best suited to each child's needs. The Director provided assurances that whilst proximity was desirable, provision would always be appropriate for meeting a child's specific needs.
- (ii) A member asked how the Programme would aim to strengthen inclusive practice whilst at the same time improving performance. The Director stated that a Government White Paper relating to SEND was expected to place strong emphasis on mainstream inclusion, supported through improved outreach and access to the right professionals at the right time. The Service would aim to utilise initiatives such as the Oakfield outreach offer, a proposed "help at hand" model, alongside other approaches, which the Department had already begun to develop, in order to enable a broader range of needs to be met within mainstream provision.
- (iii) A question was asked regarding how long-term cost reductions would be achieved. The Director explained that savings would arise largely through cost avoidance, as independent specialist placements averaged nearly £70,000 per year, compared

with £20,000 to £30,000 for maintained mainstream specialist places. An expansion of local provision, together with growth in enhanced resource bases in mainstream schools, would reduce reliance on higher cost independent placements.

- (iv) A question was asked regarding the circumstances under which an EHCP would cease. The Director stated that EHCPs often ceased once the identified provision was no longer required nor appropriate, for example when a young person had moved into adulthood and no longer needed formal educational support, or when needs had changed significantly. Improvements had been made to the annual review process in order to ensure more timely identification of cases where provision should cease.
- (v) A question was asked regarding a review of the early years SEND support offer, which included evaluating national childcare developments and local responses. The Director stated that this work involved assessing how best to support an increasing number of early years children entering provision, reviewing commissioned services, and determining future models as part of an Early Years Service review.
- (vi) Concern was raised with regards to the process of advancing smarter commissioning procurement demand management. The Director provided assurances that the intention was not to reduce existing SEND provision, but to ensure that placements remained appropriate and cost effective. The Department would continue to work collaboratively with mainstream schools in order to avoid unnecessary transitions to independent specialist provision.
- (vii) Members were concerned that demand for specialist provision would continue to exceed capacity. The Director provided assurances that plans were already underway to expand special school places, including through a new special school and satellite provision. Members noted that existing funding and staffing capacity would be directed towards more effective models of support, particularly within mainstream settings, in order to improve inclusion and reduce pressure on the High Needs Block.
- (viii) Concern was also raised regarding the feasibility of meeting highly specialist needs within mainstream schools. The Director stated that SEND support was specific to individual children and that not all schools could accommodate highly specialist requirements. However, the Department was undertaking work to expand capability where appropriate, including capital adaptations, targeted support for specific needs, and outreach aimed at upskilling mainstream staff. Members noted that provision would continue to be arranged on a case-by-case basis.
- (ix) A question was asked regarding whether national reforms linked to deficit recovery could lead to service reductions. The Director provided assurances that there was currently no indication of required service reductions and that High Needs Block funding was not expected to decrease. The DfE had outlined that it would assess the reform plan before determining the contribution to historical deficit, but further details were awaited.
- (x) Members noted that the Programme would aim to ensure consistency across all settings, as inclusivity often varied between schools. The Director emphasised that services would focus on embedding high standards and ensuring alignment across

processes, decision-making and support pathways. Strengthened powers for Local Authorities within admissions processes would help to support this objective.

RESOLVED:

That the overview of the Building Education Services Together (BEST) programme plan and information relating to the development of a Belonging in Education Strategy, be noted.

22. Oakfield Short Stay School.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which outlined changes to the Oakfield Short Stay School, and how the Council would meet its statutory duties to ensure that there were sufficient high-quality places in Leicestershire for excluded pupils or pupils who are at risk of exclusion from mainstream education. A copy of the report, marked 'Agenda Item 10', is filed with these minutes.

The Lead Member for Children and Families stated the Oakfield Short Stay School was an incredibly valuable asset and placed on record his thanks to all staff within the school for their dedication to supporting pupils to succeed.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- (i) A member asked whether the current number of places at Oakfield would be sufficient in order to meet future demand for excluded pupils and those at risk of exclusion. The Director stated that the current number of places was not expected to be sufficient in future and explained that a review was underway with the intention of expanding available places. It was anticipated that increased reintegration rates would help reduce demand, but it would be important to adopt a flexible model that could adapt to falling exclusion numbers by redirecting capacity toward outreach support in mainstream settings. Members were informed that larger buildings and increased capacity were being sought.
- (ii) With regards to monitoring arrangements, the Director reported that a performance framework had been commissioned by the Department and an initial draft had been considered within a performance meeting. The Framework would aim to track indicators including numbers of excluded and reintegrated children, turnaround times, repeat exclusions, attendance rates, and other key measures. It was noted that maintaining the quality of alternative provision, including within Oakfield, was critical.
- (iii) A member asked whether supporting more children within mainstream schools would reduce demand on Oakfield. The Director outlined that early intervention within mainstream schools was a key objective and would reduce demand for places within Oakfield. The model was being designed to provide additional outreach support both in mainstream schools and other settings.
- (iv) With regards to satellite sites, a member asked whether these were intended to meet geographical need or were required because the original accommodation was insufficient. The Director explained that the previous centres had been located within limited geographic areas and had also lacked sufficient space. The new approach sought to disperse centres across the County to meet local demand while also increasing capacity where needed. It was noted that long travel distances for

pupils or staff were undesirable and that the Service aimed for children to be educated locally in order to support reintegration.

- (v) In response to a question asked, the Director stated that alternative-provision centres had historically become long-term placements, with pupils entering in Year 8 or 9 and remaining until the end of Key Stage 4. The new model instead defined these centres as short-term interventions, with the intention of moving pupils on to more suitable long-term settings. It was noted that educational outcomes for pupils in alternative provision remained significantly lower than for those educated in mainstream schools, and that improving long-term outcomes was a central aim.
- (vi) With regards to the short-stay model, a member asked what proportion of pupils who had returned to their mainstream school later re-entered the provision. The Director advised that it was too early to report on this, as the necessary data had not yet been established. The reintegration and return rate would, however, be a key indicator within the performance framework. It was noted that where a pupil did return to Oakfield after reintegration, this would also prompt consideration of whether the mainstream school remained the most appropriate setting. The Director agreed to provide the Committee with the data at a future meeting.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the overview of changes to the Oakfield Short Stay School and how the Council would meet its statutory duties to ensure sufficient high-quality places in Leicestershire for excluded pupils or pupils at risk of exclusion from mainstream education, be noted.
- (b) That the Director of Children and Family Services be requested to provide the Committee with information relating to the number of pupils which had returned to Oakfield after reintegration in mainstream provision, at a future meeting.

23. Quarter 3 2025-26 Performance Report.

The Committee considered a joint report of the Chief Executive and the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an update on the Children and Family Services Department's performance for the period October to December 2025 (Quarter 3). A copy of the report, marked 'Agenda Item 11', is filed with these minutes.

The Lead Member for Children and Families emphasised that despite ongoing pressures, the Department had continued to deliver strong outcomes for children and families. He placed on record his thanks to all of the staff in the Department for their continued hard work.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- (i) A member asked a question regarding the number of young people (16-17) not in education, employment or training (NEET). The Director explained that the reasons varied considerably. Some young people had entered a new phase of education or training which had not suited them, or they had found that a course was not as expected. Others had experienced trauma or significant life events which had prevented them from continuing. It was noted that some young people became difficult to track because they were not required to report their activities to the local authority, although monitoring would usually continue until their 19th birthday. A

detailed NEET report had recently been commissioned by the Department in order to better understand the issue and to enable comparison against national data. The Director agreed to provide the Committee with a report relating to NEET children and young people, at a future meeting.

- (ii) Concern was raised that only 69.8% of children in care had received a dental check-up and 82.9% had an annual health assessment. The Director explained that achieving 100% performance in this area would never be possible because some young people chose not to attend health or dental appointments, despite encouragement. Members noted that challenges with access to dental services had arisen following COVID restrictions due to reduced availability, but significant work had been undertaken with dental practices in order to improve access. The Director outlined that the Department aimed to reach 80% performance in this area and that carers and young people were strongly encouraged to attend. A member then asked whether the data could be broken down by age group, as missed appointments for younger children would be of greater concern. The Director agreed to provide the data broken down by age-group, at a future meeting.
- (iii) A question was asked regarding the percentage of re-referrals to Children's Social Care within 12 months. The Director outlined that re-referral rates were expected, and were appropriate, and that some children would reasonably be re-referred within a 12-month period. The Director provided assurances that the service routinely audited cases in order to distinguish between re-referrals caused by new concerns and those resulting from earlier actions which had not fully addressed an issue. Members noted that some children were appropriately diverted to Early Help at the point of first referral but could later need to return to Social Care. Re-referrals were closely monitored through monthly performance meetings. Repeated plans did not always indicate persistent problems and could reflect the need to respond appropriately to any new or ongoing safeguarding risks. The Director explained that families experiencing issues such as domestic abuse, parental mental-health problems, or substance misuse often required renewed intervention. The ending of child protection plans were monitored carefully in order to ensure adequate support was in place. Members noted that some figures reflected large sibling groups affected by the same incident.
- (iv) A question was asked regarding a 12% increase in the number of children educated at home, particularly those aged 12–15. The Director stated that the reasons were mixed. In terms of the reasons behind home educating, some parents declined a school offered or preferred a different type of provision to that offered. Others felt that their child's needs were better met through home education, particularly where the child had social, emotional or mental-health difficulties. The Director outlined that work was being undertaken to commission additional provision for this cohort of children and to expand the inclusion service. Where parents wished for their children to return to school, places were available, and the Authority would work with them. Members noted that elective home education was an area of significant concern, with vulnerable children being at particular risk, and that stronger legislation and increased Local Authority powers would be welcomed.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the update on the Children and Family Services Department's performance for the period October to December 2025 (Quarter 3), be noted.

- (b) That the Director of children and Family Services be requested to provide the Committee with a report relating to children and young people not in education, Employment or training (NEET), at a future meeting.
- (c) That the Director of Children and Family Services be requested to provide the Committee with age specific data relating to the percentage of children in care who had received a dental check-up and an annual health assessment, at a future meeting.

24. Date of next meeting.

RESOLVED:

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 2 June 2026 at 14:00.

2.00 - 2.56 pm
03 March 2026

CHAIRMAN