

Minutes

CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE

13 November 2025



HILLINGDON
LONDON

Meeting held at Committee Room 6 - Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge UB8 1UW

Committee Members Present:

Councillor Heena Makwana (Chair),
Councillor Ekta Gohil (Vice-Chair),
Councillor Peter Smallwood OBE,
Councillor Kishan Bhatt,
Councillor Jan Sweeting (Opposition Lead),
Councillor Tony Gill, and
Councillor Narinder Garg

Co-Opted Member Present:

Mr Tony Little

Councillors Present:

Councillor Colleen Sullivan, Fostering & Permanence Panel representative

Officers Present:

Julie Kelly (Corporate Director of Children's Services)
Tehseen Kauser (Director of Children's Social Care)
Alex Coman (Director of Children's Safeguarding & Care)
Abi Preston (Director of Education & SEND)
Andy Goodwin (Head of Strategic Finance & Deputy S151 Officer)
Luisa Hansen (Head of Finance, Children's & SEND),
Poppy Reddy (Assistant Director for Care, Support and Transition)
Donna Hugh (Assistant Director of Care Provision Services)
Kathryn Angelini (Assistant Director for Education)
Lisa Steel (Virtual School Headteacher)
Natalie Craig (Service Manager – Care Delivery)
Ryan Dell (Democratic Services Officer)

36. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

None.

37. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (Agenda Item 2)

None.

38. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the previous meeting be agreed

39. TO CONFIRM THAT THE ITEMS OF BUSINESS MARKED AS PART I WILL BE

	CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THAT THE ITEMS MARKED AS PART II WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE <i>(Agenda Item 4)</i>
40.	<p>BUDGET & SPENDING REPORT <i>(Agenda Item 5)</i></p> <p>Officers introduced the report, noting that it was the third time this report had been presented to the Committee.</p> <p>There had been an adverse movement of £200k, primarily due to the increased cost of care rather than an increase in demand. The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) had shown no further adverse movement, which was considered positive, and forecasting was described as accurate and robust at this stage.</p> <p>Officers expressed confidence in the savings plan, noting that the vast majority of planned savings were expected to be achieved.</p> <p>£273,000 savings remained under review, linked to increasing residential provision. Officers anticipated that, subject to Ofsted registration of the new provision, these savings would be achieved by the end of the financial year. Ofsted had visited the new provision, and the Council awaited their decision.</p> <p>Members asked if the service area would need to declare a budget deficit for the next year, noting that savings had been made but offset by overspends, particularly in care costs. Members also asked about the plan of action leading up to December Cabinet and February budget. Officers noted that the situation was challenging, with the cost of care being the main driver of overspends. Officers were going through STAR Chambers, and efforts were ongoing to increase residential provision and to reduce costs. Regular meetings and proposals were in place to address the overspend, but the final budget position was still uncertain. Officers expressed reasonable confidence in reducing costs but could not confirm the final outcome at this stage.</p> <p>Officers confirmed that the budget for 2026/27 was being prepared for Cabinet consideration on 18 December, with a further report scheduled for the Select Committee in January. There was uncertainty regarding government funding allocations, with final figures expected after the Cabinet meeting. This was typical of recent years and made it difficult to predict the budget position.</p> <p>Members referred to the DSG overspend of £12 million and requested an audit of in-house SEND capacity and capital works, noting that a lot of work had been ongoing in this area. Officers advised that there was an annual update on the SEND Sufficiency Strategy upcoming, with capital projects underway, particularly in secondary provision.</p> <p>Members also asked about progress on the inclusivity agenda and support for schools. There had been positive trends in mainstream placements and ongoing work with schools to support inclusion, including outreach projects, and work with the Centre for ADHD and Autism.</p> <p>Members asked about feedback from the DfE regarding Hillingdon's progress in reducing the DSG deficit. Officers noted that the Council had received positive recognition from the DfE for its financial efficiency and improved outcomes. While the safety valve project had closed to new Local Authorities, further information on payments and new programmes was expected. The Committee commended officers</p>

and the team for their achievements.

Members asked whether schools were delivering the same service with less money due to changes in banding. Officers explained that the new banding model, developed with school leaders and a specialist consultant, focused on group support, where appropriate, rather than one-to-one provision, which was no longer considered effective as the standard approach to support, and recognised feedback from young people who reinforced this. Funding per hour had increased, but the approach was more flexible and needs-based. Some schools had seen decreases in funding, others had seen increases, depending on individual needs. All children will have transferred over to the new banding by the end of the financial year, which would help with future planning. The transition had generally been well received by schools, though some out-of-borough schools had found it more challenging due to not being part of the development of the framework.

Members asked about the use of capitalisation to reduce overspend and plans to phase this out. Officers clarified that transformation capitalisation was used for activities generating ongoing savings. The government had extended the use of these powers to March 2028. The Council reviewed this provision often to ensure compliance and value for money, with ongoing review in line with government policy.

Members asked how the Council ensured that concentrating on in-borough provision did not dilute quality for vulnerable children. Officers advised that in-borough provision allowed for closer oversight and partnership with schools, leading to high standards. Independent provision did not necessarily equate to higher quality, and in-borough placements also reduced travel and maintained community links for young people.

Members asked about providing additional accommodation, including the distribution of children's homes across the borough. Officers explained that location assessments were rigorous, considering safety, access to transport, and education. The needs of young people were always considered. Not all children could be placed in-borough for safety reasons. The current and planned provision was expected to balance the need for in-borough placements and reduce reliance on external providers, with benefits for children's wellbeing and community integration. In-borough provision often mean young people can be closer to their school, GP and families.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the 2025/26 Month 5 budget monitoring position.

41.

ANNUAL PERFORMANCE MONITORING (Agenda Item 6)

Officers introduced the annual performance report, noting that it was now presented in a new, clearer format. The report provided benchmarking for 2024-25. Officers advised that a bi-annual update would follow soon to ensure data remained current. The report highlighted areas of strong performance, cost-effectiveness, pressure points, and areas for improvement, particularly in placement sufficiency and demand management.

Members commended the presentation of the report, noting it as clear, concise and easy to read.

Members queried the reasons behind the increase in the number of children on child protection plans, which had risen to 240. Officers explained that this reflected both increased demand and complexity within families, as well as fluctuations due to family

size. The number of child protection plans had remained relatively stable over the year, with no unusual demographic changes. Officers also noted that while the number of child protection investigations was high, work was ongoing to ensure appropriate intervention levels and to avoid unnecessary intrusion into family life.

Members noted social worker vacancy rates and recruitment challenges, highlighting that this was a national issue. Officers reported that the situation had improved over the past year, with a reduction in vacancies due to successful recruitment and retention initiatives including the London Pledge, improved internal conditions, and enhanced training and support. The Council had also benefited from apprenticeship programmes and a focus on developing newly qualified staff. Officers emphasised the importance of workplace culture and support in retaining staff, given that pay rates were broadly similar across London.

Members asked about the robustness and accuracy of the data underpinning the report. Officers advised that significant progress had been made in data quality, with high levels of confidence in the figures presented. Dashboards were regularly reviewed, and any anomalies were quickly identified and addressed. Officers acknowledged that occasional data entry errors could occur but stated that overall confidence was much higher than in previous years.

Members referenced the Council's performance in reducing the number of young people classified as NEET, particularly in comparison to neighbouring boroughs. Hillingdon had implemented a team of NEET trackers, resulting in a significantly lower proportion of "not known" cases compared to the London average. The Council was focusing on early intervention, vocational options, and supporting young people before they left secondary school.

The Committee noted that while the Council had succeeded in reducing first-time entrants to the youth justice system, there was some concern that the reoffending rate among those already in the system remained high. Officers acknowledged this, though explained that the small cohort size skewed the percentages, and that the actual number of offences was low. The Council had undertaken detailed analysis with the Youth Justice Partnership Board and had implemented early intervention and diversion initiatives at police stations to address reoffending.

Members commended the take-up of early years free childcare places and noted the benefits for families.

Members asked about the underperformance in the completion rate of EHCPs within the 20-week target, and the associated costs of delays, including compensation and tribunal cases. Officers responded that most tribunal challenges related to parental preference for schools rather than delays in plan completion. The Council had focused on mediation to reduce tribunal cases and had improved its 20-week completion rate, now performing better than the national average. Additional staff had been allocated to assessments, and ongoing improvements were being made as part of the improvement plan.

Members asked how financial pressures were affecting the delivery of new local government outcomes and priorities, including health and wellbeing. Officers stated that, while this was primarily a matter for other committees, financial constraints had not prevented the Council from delivering required services. Instead, they had encouraged more innovative and collaborative approaches with partners and better use

of local assets. The impact of future funding settlements and reforms were awaited. Members noted two areas of concern – placement sufficiency and reoffending within the Youth Justice service.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- 1. Noted the Annual Performance Report for 2024/25, as attached in Appendix 1; and**
- 2. Delegated comments for inclusion in the Annual Performance Report to Full Council, to the Democratic Services Officer in conjunction with the Chair and in consultation with the Opposition Lead**

42.	<p>CARE STRATEGY FOR CHILDREN AND CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE (<i>Agenda Item 7</i>)</p> <p>Officers introduced the Cared For Children & Young People Strategy, noting that it formalised existing practices and provided a clear and accessible framework for improving outcomes for children in care and care experienced young people. The strategy set out the Council's responsibilities, priorities, and actions to strengthen support for young people, particularly through their journey in care and transition into adulthood. Officers emphasised the vision that every child and young person in care should have the same opportunities as any other child, with a focus on stability, well-being, and successful transitions into adulthood.</p> <p>Officers highlighted the importance of language, noting that terminology had been updated in response to feedback from young people. For example, the terms "cared for children" and "care experienced young people" were now used, and references to "cases" and "placements" had been replaced with "children" and "homes." The strategy had been co-produced with young people, partners, and professionals, ensuring that their voices were central to its development.</p> <p>Members welcomed the strategy and its ambitions, particularly the involvement of young people in its development.</p> <p>Members asked how the Council inspired ambition and achievement among cared for children and whether this was driven by foster carers, corporate initiatives, or a collective approach. Officers advised that promoting aspiration was a collective responsibility, involving everyone in the young person's life, including carers, teachers, and the wider Council. Officers described various initiatives, such as employing care experienced young people, involving them in events and interview panels, and providing opportunities to develop skills and independence. The Virtual School and Participation Team also played key roles in supporting aspirations, both academic and vocational.</p> <p>Members noted the change in language and asked what alternative terminology young people preferred. Officers explained that while some young people disliked some of the terminology, some phrases (such as looked after children) had to be used for statutory and legal purposes. The Council continued to work with young people to refine language and ensure it reflected their preferences, with the strategy remaining in draft form to accommodate ongoing feedback.</p>
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Members asked about youth justice and reoffending. Officers reported that significant work had been undertaken to reduce reoffending, including diversionary activities and partnership working. The Council had established high-risk panels to collectively plan for young people known to youth justice services, focusing on early intervention and prevention. The creation of a specialist adolescent service was also highlighted as a key development in supporting at-risk young people.

Members commended the comprehensive nature of the strategy and stressed the importance of regular review, suggesting that the voices of young people should be heard more frequently than annually. Officers confirmed that regular checks and balances were in place, including independent reviews and ongoing engagement with young people.

Members also asked about the long-term outcomes for care experienced young people after leaving care. The Council was committed to supporting care experienced young people into independence through pathway plans, the Staying Close scheme, and ongoing contact and support up to age 25 (and beyond in some cases, such as for those in education). Officers described efforts to maintain relationships and provide guidance, with additional support for those with complex needs and transitions to adult services. It was also important to note that the transition to adulthood started prior to turning 18.

Members highlighted the importance of health and wellbeing, particularly mental health support for care experienced young people, and asked about access to services and partnership working with the NHS. Officers acknowledged the challenges in accessing mental health services and described regular communication with CAMHS and NHS colleagues to promote access. The Council also utilised independent therapeutic services, such as Ask Jan, which provided six counselling sessions for care experienced young people. There were also close relationships with the ICB. Officers emphasised the importance of positive relationships and early intervention, including the use of strengths and difficulties questionnaires to identify needs and to refer young people for additional support, including to MAPS, where needed. The Council maintained a continuum of care, from early intervention to specialist services, and worked closely with health partners to ensure timely support.

Members commended officers; noted the report; and noted that comments would be produced.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- 1. Noted the strategic direction and priorities outlined in the draft strategy; and**
- 2. Delegated comments to the Democratic Services Officer in conjunction with the Chair and in consultation with the Opposition Lead**

43. FOSTERING REVIEW - WITNESS SESSION 1 (Agenda Item 8)

Officers introduced the fostering offer in Hillingdon, including information on recruitment, support, achievements, impact, and future plans.

The fostering offer had been launched in May 2024 to improve recruitment and retention of foster carers and outcomes for cared for children. Hillingdon had

established a strong community, or 'village', for children. This including recruiting the best possible carers for young people as this is what the young people deserved.

Recruitment of foster carers had been highly successful, with over a 120% increase in inquiries compared to the previous year. Hillingdon was also part of the West London Fostering Hub, and had received some of the highest number of inquiries (127) among eight local authorities.

Over 20% of inquiries converted to expressions of interest, while most rejections were due to unsuitable requests or living arrangements.

The Care Friends app had been introduced in September to incentivise foster carers to promote recruitment, with other boroughs consulting with Hillingdon on its strategy.

There were currently 78 fostering households, with 13 more expected to be approved by the end of the financial year. Of these, 34 were single carers with the remainder being couples.

The service aimed to widen ethnicity and religious representation of foster carers, reflecting Hillingdon's diversity. Over 50% were from the global majority.

Age ranges of foster carers were broad, ranging from 20 to 80 years old. The longest-serving foster carer had been with Hillingdon for 40 years.

Twelve connected carers provided family link fostering for 17 children, contributing to the sufficiency strategy.

Specialist placements, including parent and child placements, were being developed. There was currently one parent-and-child carer, with growth in this area anticipated.

Foster carers could receive up to £1,500 per week for children with higher or more complex needs, alongside annual energy bill contributions, Council Tax reductions, and reimbursement of Merlin passes.

Trauma-informed training was provided, including access to over 100 online and in-person courses, with additional consultations from the MAPS team.

Recruitment used real-life stories and digital tools to attract carers from diverse backgrounds.

Foster carers were celebrated through events and award schemes, including appreciation events and long-service awards. This included awards for resilience, sibling support, community impact, exceptional care, and two long service awards for 10- and 40- years service. The 'Star by Far Award' had been introduced bi-monthly to recognise carers going above and beyond.

Feedback was regularly sought from carers, children, and professionals to highlight positive relationships and experiences.

All cared for children aged 2–18 had an allocated education officer in the virtual school team, who would lead their Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings, which also involved foster carers, social workers, and designated teachers, to celebrate successes, note areas of praise and development, and set SMART targets. The voice

of foster carers was very important in these meetings, and it was noted that children who were living with foster families tended to have better outcomes than those who did not. The Virtual School worked alongside the foster team and could address any school issues affecting the home. This ensured a holistic approach and stability for the young person.

The Virtual School helped designated teachers understand the journey of a child in care and the importance of the foster experience. Furthermore, the Virtual School provided training for designated teachers and foster carers, including sessions on resilience, transitions and caring for children with challenging behaviours.

Officers emphasised the importance of both recruitment and retention of foster carers. Specialist recruitment was being developed for carers able to support children with disabilities and adolescents, as this was where a need was seen.

The Care Offer approach aimed to ensure residential care was a step, not a destination for young people, with transitions to family environments prioritised wherever possible.

Officers were also looking into recruiting out of hours foster carers as, due to being a port authority, young people can arrive at Heathrow at any time and so this could help avoid the young people having to stay in the airport. This would also assist with young people who become looked after.

A fostering placement coordinator role was being piloted to optimise matching of children and carers.

The Mockingbird scheme was a license scheme that provided a hub for a group of foster carers who are supported by experienced foster carers in how to care for young people. The scheme had been piloted and was under review for future expansion.

Members asked about support for foster carers experiencing challenges, such as when placements triggered personal challenges. Officers advised that the assessment process was intensive and could last eight to nine months, with training, including trauma-informed training, provided throughout the assessment period. This training model was the same as that for residential homes, and feedback on the training had been positive. The MAPS service supported both children and foster carers, helping carers understand and respond to challenging behaviours. The supportive relationship between foster carers and their supervising social workers was important as the social workers could assist in supporting the foster carers when young people moved on after their placement.

Officers were re-launching the buddy system of peer support, and coffee mornings and events were available. New foster carers coming through were from diverse backgrounds and this helped with peer support.

Members asked about the inclusion of LGBTQ+ carers, and about instances of carers entering and leaving relationships. Hillingdon did not discriminate and had recruited same-sex couples and single carers. There had been instances of foster carers entering and leaving relationships, and support was provided for carers experiencing life changes, with consideration for the needs of children in placement. There were also annual reviews and updated assessments for changes in household composition. These changes could also be referred to the Fostering & Permanence Panel.

Members asked about placements for young people with potentially prejudiced backgrounds. Officers explained the matching process, which considered personality, culture, religion, identity, and perceptions. These profiles were shared with potential carers. Transition periods and dialogue were used to ensure suitability, with support from supervising social workers and the MAPS team.

Members asked about the Care Friends app and ensuring safeguarding. Officers explained that the app had been launched originally and been popular in Wales, and it had led to a 30% increase in update of recruitment of foster carers. It also allowed foster carers to be actively involved in the recruitment process. Locally, it had been launched at the recent Foster Care Appreciation event. It also aided in strategic recruitment and the need for specialist carers, and officers were currently assessing a potential carer who had come via the app from an agency. There were small cash incentives for using the app. Word of mouth was also an important promotional method. Safeguarding was ensured through rigorous assessment processes, with no details of any young people shared via the app.

Members commended officers and asked how the Committee could add value given the rapid progress in fostering. Officers welcomed scrutiny and input from Members, emphasising the importance of community engagement and feedback. The Committee was encouraged to help promote recruitment and retention, and to provide insights from their constituencies, as well as their own insights. Officers also highlighted the upcoming witness sessions with foster carers and young people, who would also give useful feedback.

Members asked how many foster carers were needed. Foster care remained the preferred option for young people who cannot live with their birth families as it provided a stable, family-based environment for those children. Foster care can also enable the young people to stay in their local community, attend the same school, access the same GP, see their friends and have contact with their birth family. As at 31 March 2025, 50% of cared for children were in foster placements. After this, officers would look at connected carers and extended family members. There was not a finite number of foster carers required as there had to be the right foster carer with the right skills for the right young person. It was also noted that foster carers can move on or retire, so there would always be some turnover. The more foster carers that were available, the more ability to match foster carers to the needs of the young people, including those with disabilities or those who were slightly older.

Members requested data on the number of children needing foster care, placement durations, and churn rates among foster carers. Officers agreed to provide this information.

Members commended officers and acknowledged the progress made in fostering.

RESOLVED: That the Committee asked questions of officers as part of its review.

44. **FORWARD PLAN** (*Agenda Item 9*)

Members noted that there appeared to be more reports going to the Cabinet Member rather than to Cabinet, citing the School Organisation Plan, Annual Education Standards report, the Care Strategy for Children and Care Experienced Young People and Determination of Relevant Area for Admissions Arrangements.

	<p>Officers noted that in general, more service level reports would go to the Cabinet Member rather than to Cabinet.</p> <p>Members suggested that there had been a change and asked for the reasons why. Officers would follow up.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the Forward Plan</p>
45.	<p>WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 10</i>)</p> <p>Members asked to have an audit of venues used in the past year for the Youth Offer.</p> <p>Members also highlighted the Co-Opted Member vacancies of the Committee. Officers noted that these would look to be filled in line with the upcoming local elections.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Committee considered the report</p>
	<p>The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 8.55 pm.</p>

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Ryan Dell on democratic@hillingdon.gov.uk. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.