

Minutes

CHILDREN, FAMILIES & EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE

25 September 2025

Meeting held at Committee Room 5 – Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge, UB8 1UW



	<p>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</p> <p>Co-Opted Member Present: Mr Tony Little</p> <p>Cabinet Members Present: Councillor Susan O'Brien</p> <p>Councillors Present: Councillor Richard Mills</p> <p>Officers Present: Julie Kelly (Corporate Director of Children's Services) Luisa Hansen (Head of Finance, Children's & SEND), Andy Goodwin (Head of Strategic Finance) Abi Preston (Director of Education & SEND) Tehseen Kauser (Director of Children's Social Care) Alex Coman (Director of Children's Safeguarding & Care) Donna Hugh (Assistant Director of Care Provision Services) Ryan Dell (Democratic Services Officer) Naveed Ali (Democratic Services Apprentice)</p>
26.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>None.</p>
27.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>None.</p>
28.	<p>MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the previous meeting be agreed</p>
29.	<p>TO CONFIRM THAT THE ITEMS OF BUSINESS MARKED AS PART I WILL BE</p>

	<p>CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THAT THE ITEMS MARKED AS PART II WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE (<i>Agenda Item 4</i>)</p>
30.	<p>BUDGET & SPENDING REPORT (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p> <p>Officers introduced the Budget & Spending report, which covered the 2024/25 outturn position and the 2025/26 month 4 position.</p> <p>In the previous year, services in this Committee's remit had experienced an overspend of £2.5 million, primarily due to increased costs in children's care placements and pressures on Section 17 budgets, often related to accommodation.</p> <p>Some anticipated savings, particularly those linked to the fostering offer, had been delayed due to the time required to recruit and assess new foster carers. These savings had been carried forward into the current year.</p> <p>Other savings, especially those reliant on income generation from services such as the music service and adult learning, had not been achieved and had been written off.</p> <p>For the current year, at month four, similar pressures persisted. There had been no significant increase in the number of children entering care, but a notable rise in the cost of care placements. On the Council's residential project, part of the Care Offer savings plan, a further twelve beds were expected to be registered soon. This expansion was anticipated to bring the savings plan back on track.</p> <p>Officers noted that while some savings were rated as 'amber', many were on track and would likely move to 'green' in month 5. The main risk identified related to the Charville residential site and the Care Offer, which depended on timely registration and occupancy of new beds.</p> <p>Members queried the impact of savings plans on the quality of early years and music services. Officers responded that work was ongoing, with a focus on wraparound and sufficiency. The music service review had shown that pressures were due to overestimated income rather than overspending. There was a new Head of Music, and efforts were underway to modernise the offer.</p> <p>Members commended the tables in the report as very informative, and asked about the sustainability of using capital receipts to offset overspends. Officers explained that transformation capital had been used for several years to support major programmes, such as the expansion of care provision, and that this approach was in line with government policy, with Government confirming this policy as a funding mechanism for transformation activities for the next five years. Officers reassured the Committee that the Council's asset base continued to grow despite disposals. Officers also commended the education team for reducing the in-year DSG deficit.</p> <p>Members raised concerns about overspending on accommodation, particularly in relation to temporary accommodation pressures. Officers clarified that there was a distinction between accommodation for care leavers and temporary accommodation for families, noting improvements in sufficiency for care leavers and ongoing work to address pressures in both areas. Officers also highlighted the Staying Close project for care leavers. There had been a reduction in the number of young people in semi-independent accommodation.</p> <p>Members asked about plans to address the DSG cumulative deficit, which stood at</p>

	<p>£65.6 million. Officers acknowledged the challenge, noting that while the in-year deficit had reduced, the long-term recovery plan depended on upcoming SEND reforms and continued lobbying of government. The Council was actively engaged with the DfE and pan-London networks to advocate for fairer funding. The focus was on meeting the in-year budget.</p> <p>Members asked if any resources had been specifically allocated to the education needs of families in temporary accommodation as a result of destitution. Officers confirmed that this was not the case, though the issue was recognised and had been raised in feedback on local government funding formulas.</p> <p>Members asked about barriers to savings plans for the Stronger Families programme and fostering offer. On fostering, this was about lead-in times for recruiting foster carers. The Stronger Families programme was about the reduction of children coming into care and evidencing this. Improved tracking measures had since been implemented.</p> <p>Members asked for an update on the Safety Valve agreement. Officers stated that the Council was awaiting government guidance on the future of the agreement and any additional payments, with modelling underway for various scenarios.</p> <p>Members discussed persistent patterns of overspending in children's social care, attributed to rising placement costs and market pressures. Officers outlined efforts to expand in-borough provision, including fostering, residential, and Staying Close projects, and emphasised the importance of supporting children to step down from residential to family-based care.</p> <p>Officers highlighted progress in reducing out-of-borough placements, with significant investment in local provision and positive outcomes in keeping young people in the borough. This included developing Designated Units and SRPs. Other developments included Pinn River and further developments at Meadow High School. Work was ongoing on EBSNA to try to prevent issues from escalating.</p> <p>Members asked about ongoing work with schools to improve early intervention and prevention. Officers noted that primary schools tended to be more inclusive than secondary schools, and noted initiatives such as the Centre for ADHD and Autism project to prevent placement breakdowns. Inclusion was expected to be a key element of upcoming SEND reforms.</p> <p>The Committee also discussed SEND transport costs, which were reported to be on budget for the current year.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Noted the 2024/25 outturn position; and 2. Noted the 2025/26 Month 4 budget monitoring position
31.	<p>FOSTERING REVIEW – SCOPING REPORT (<i>Agenda Item 6</i>)</p> <p>The Committee considered the scoping report for the review into fostering.</p> <p>Officers noted that now was the right time to conduct this review and that it would align closely with the broader Care Offer, the continuum of care, and the recruitment of more</p>

foster carers.

Interest in fostering had significantly increased since the launch of the new offer with an increase in applications from prospective carers. 14 new fostering households had been recruited since the launch with a further 14 families at various stages of the assessment process. It was clarified that not all applicants would be approved as there was a robust process designed to ensure suitability. Officers further advised that while some foster carers were retiring or resigning, the net increase was positive.

There had been a recent ceremony celebrating foster carers, including recognition of long-serving carers and new recruits, illustrating the breadth of experience within the service.

Investing in foster carers was essential for driving change and improving outcomes for children and young people. The review could generate recommendations to Cabinet to further enhance recruitment, the benefits of fostering, and recognition of the role foster carers have for young people.

Officers noted that, despite positive developments, challenges remained including fostering breakdowns and an ongoing shortage of foster carers. The Committee's scrutiny was welcomed, not only for the successes but also on areas needing further improvement. Officers also welcomed the proposed Terms of Reference for focusing on young peoples' experiences and placement stability, as well as the experiences of foster carers.

Members also stressed the importance of hearing directly from young people, suggesting a private witness session to allow them to share their experiences freely.

Members further suggested receiving briefings on training and safeguarding, particularly "PACE" training undertaken by foster carers, to better understand how carers were equipped to keep young people safe.

Members also suggested hearing from carers involved in the "mockingbird constellation" to gather their views and identify areas for improvement.

Members referenced the relatively short timeframe for the review, noting witness sessions in November and December, and conclusions to be drawn in January. Members also raised the possibility of an additional witness session, and queried if the 'early ideas to consider' were already being done. Officers responded that, while the Council can evidence increased recruitment and an improved offer, the value of the review would lie in determining whether further improvements can be made, particularly regarding the quality of care and young peoples' experiences. This could help to narrow the review's focus.

Officers welcomed the Committee's 'critical friend' role, and its review of existing practices would also be useful.

Members raised the possibility of learning from neighbouring authorities and statistical neighbours. Officers noted that most authorities had been following similar approaches, and Hillingdon's new strategy represented a departure from established practice, and so there would be limited benefit to this.

Members also suggested broadening the search for best practise to include

	<p>international case studies, though officers noted that differences in legal frameworks limited the applicability of overseas models.</p> <p>Officers noted learning from the independent sector and that some carers had transferred to Hillingdon as a result of the new offer.</p> <p>Members suggested that there be consideration given to placement stability and outcomes for children when this happened. Members emphasised the importance of understanding not just preventative measures, but also the mechanisms and interventions in place for when issues arise, and learning from those experiences. This could be investigated in the proposed first witness session.</p> <p>Members agreed the scoping report.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Committee agreed this scoping report</p>
32.	<p>CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL MINUTES (<i>Agenda Item 7</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the minutes</p>
33.	<p>FORWARD PLAN (<i>Agenda Item 8</i>)</p> <p>Members highlighted the item entitled “Pathways for Young People” and asked for more information on what this may include, referencing an overspend on accommodation.</p> <p>Members also highlighted the item entitled “Determination of relevant area for admissions arrangements” and asked if this was due to be done via planning areas.</p> <p>Officers would investigate these and report back to Members.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the Forward Plan</p>
34.	<p>WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 9</i>)</p> <p>Members noted that one of the suggested topics for a review was spare capacity in schools, and asked about an information item on this.</p> <p>Members also asked for an update on Co-opted Member vacancies on the Committee, and if these could be filled for the next administrative year.</p> <p>Officers would investigate these and report back to Members.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Committee considered the report</p>
	<p>The meeting, which commenced at 7:00 pm, closed at 7:50 pm.</p>

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Ryan Dell, Democratic Services Officer on democratic@hillingdon.gov.uk. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, officers, the press and members of the public.