

Minutes

CHILDREN, FAMILIES & EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE

12 March 2026

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



HILLINGDON
LONDON

	<p>Committee Members Present: Councillor Heena Makwana (Chair), Councillor Ekta Gohil (Vice-Chair), Councillor Colleen Sullivan, Councillor Farhad Choubedar, Councillor Jan Sweeting (Opposition Lead), and Councillor Tony Gill</p> <p>Co-Opted Member Present: Mr Tony Little</p> <p>Officers Present: Matt Davis (Director of Strategic & Operational Finance) Alex Coman (Director of Children Safeguarding & Care) Abi Preston (Director of Education & SEND) Nav Minhas (School Place Planning and Policy Manager) Gary Binstead (Head of Education & SEND Commissioning) James Rogers (School Place Planning Officer) Ryan Dell (Democratic Services Officer)</p>
68.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies had been received from Councillor Peter Smallwood OBE, with Councillor Colleen Sullivan substituting.</p> <p>Apologies had been received from Councillor Kishan Bhatt, with Councillor Farhad Choubedar substituting.</p> <p>Apologies had also been received from Councillor Narinder Garg.</p>
69.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>None.</p>
70.	<p>MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the previous meeting be agreed</p>
71.	<p>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>)</p>
72.	<p>BUDGET & SPENDING (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p>

Officers introduced the Budget & Spending report for Month 9.

Members were informed that Month 9 showed a pressure of £6.4m, an increase from £6.0m reported at Month 7. This increase was attributed to continuing asylum pressures as well as additional pressures within children's social care, particularly the costs of children's placements and children's homes.

Officers reported that the directorate had achieved 96% of its £4.5m savings target, with no identified risks to the delivery of the remaining savings.

Officers advised that the DSG position had remained broadly stable compared with previous reports, with a projected in-year deficit of £9.6m. While demand continued to increase, particularly in advance of forthcoming SEND reforms, officers considered the position to be relatively positive. It was noted that significant progress had been made over recent years in stabilising DSG pressures.

In response to a question regarding the Government's proposed 90% write-off of SEND deficits, officers explained that local authorities would be required to submit a SEND Reform Plan by late June, which would be subject to approval by the Secretary of State. Only once the plan was approved would the High Needs Stability Grant be released. If approved in the first submission round, payment was expected to be received in the autumn term, with a later payment in spring 2027 if approval was delayed. Officers noted that while some information had been received from Government, further clarity was still awaited.

Members asked whether the reduction in the DSG deficit had impacted outcomes for children with SEND. Officers responded that outcomes were closely monitored and that the main driver of cost reduction had been a move towards educating children locally and within maintained schools, rather than in high-cost independent placements. Officers were confident that outcomes remained strong, noting that maintained special schools in the borough delivered outstanding outcomes despite significantly lower costs than INMSS (Independent and Non-Maintained Special School) settings. However, there was increased demand and continued close monitoring was required.

Members sought clarification on the DSG deficit that would remain after the application of the 90% grant and how ongoing overspends would be addressed. Officers explained that the 90% included this year and so would go against the cumulative balance at the end of this financial year, meaning the £9.6m projected in-year deficit was included within that figure. Officers estimated that the authority could receive around £69m, leaving a residual deficit of approximately £6m. Officers highlighted that the in-year DSG deficit had reduced significantly over time, from £28m two years ago to £9.6m currently, demonstrating a strong downward trajectory. Members were advised that demand could increase further due to a surge in EHCP requests ahead of SEND reforms. It was noted that with the 90% paid off, the Council would save money within the General Fund on interest charges.

Members asked if there would be conditions on the 90% due to the historically high deficit. Officers advised that, with the exception of a suitable SEND reform plan being approved, officers were not aware of any other specific conditions linked to the funding and that the safety valve scheme had now closed. While Hillingdon may have previously been an outlier with its high deficit, it was now in a much stronger position compared to other authorities. Hillingdon had built up confidence with the DfE with its positive steps, and this had been recognised by a letter from the DfE. It was noted that Hillingdon had significantly lowered costs while improving outcomes. The 90% payment

would be applied universally, and each local authority would have a SEND advisor and a financial advisor with the level of support tailored to each authority's circumstances. Officers considered that the work already undertaken locally had placed the council in a strong position.

Members asked whether the reported savings were dependent on a reduction in demand. Officers responded that demand had not necessarily reduced but had been managed differently through changes to delivery models and investment in in-house provision. Savings had been achieved through measures such as increasing foster carer capacity and expanding in-house residential provision, which reduced reliance on more expensive external placements. It was noted that the 96% savings achievement reported at Month 9 had since increased to 100%.

Members queried a savings line relating to repeat pregnancies within social care. Officers clarified that this focused on supporting parents who had previously had children removed from their care, ensuring they were better prepared and supported if they had another child, thereby reducing the risk of repeat removals and associated costs.

Members asked about the £6.4m overspend. Officers explained that asylum pressures remained a significant and unpredictable driver of overspend, as well as the discrepancy between grants and costs. In addition, the current year had been a major period of transformation for children's services, with substantial investment in foster carers (17 new households), in-house residential provision (12 additional beds), and new delivery models focused on early intervention and community-based support to prevent escalation to statutory intervention. While pressures would continue into the following year, officers were more confident due to budget realignment, better demand forecasting, and the embedding of new ways of working.

In response to a question about schools' views on the changes being implemented, officers emphasised that schools were key partners in supporting children and were closely engaged at both strategic and locality levels. Schools were statutory safeguarding partners and were involved in strategic decision-making. Officers reported that feedback from schools had been positive.

Officers added that next year's budget included approximately £12m of additional investment to reflect underlying demand pressures in children's services, which were contributing to the current year's overspend. Officers also noted that part of the increase in the forecast overspend during the year related to decisions around the use of capital receipts and transformation funding, rather than solely to service-level pressures.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the 2025/26 Month 9 budget monitoring position

73.

SCHOOL PLACE PLANNING: SCHOOL ORGANISATION PLAN (*Agenda Item 6*)

Officers introduced the School Organisation Plan.

Officers advised that the School Organisation Plan had first been presented to the Committee two years prior, with the expectation that annual updates would be provided.

Members welcomed the existence of a School Organisation Plan but expressed

concern about the reported reduction of 28.7% in nursery-age children, highlighting that this cohort would progress through infant, junior, and secondary phases in future years. Members noted that falling rolls were already placing pressure on primary schools and asked whether there was evidence of improvement through late admissions into the cohort. Officers acknowledged that birth rates and pupil numbers had been declining and that this had been known for some time. The projections were monitored closely and actual numbers broadly aligned with projected figures. However, officers continued to monitor sufficiency closely and were placing increased emphasis on the importance of the School Organisation Plan as a strategic planning tool. Officers outlined proposals to run workshops with schools to support them in understanding projections and using them for forward planning, and when preparing three-year budgets. It was noted that falling rolls created significant financial challenges for schools and that this issue linked closely to proposals such as amalgamation. Officers also confirmed that the School Organisation Plan was updated annually and that work was underway to strengthen its coverage of early years and SEND, with the intention of developing a broader sufficiency plan across education settings.

Members raised a further concern regarding the planning of secondary school places, particularly the proportion of pupils travelling from the south of the borough to the north, which was reported as 23%. Members noted that this was compounded by housing pressures, and asked whether more strategic planning could be undertaken to address this pattern. Officers responded that this issue had recently been discussed at a high-needs group meeting and acknowledged that a number of families chose to travel to schools outside their immediate area, despite the availability of strong local schools. Officers explained that parental preference played a significant role, particularly in a context of falling pupil numbers where choice was greater. There was also a challenge of changing parental perceptions where, for example, schools had previously received poor Ofsted judgements, noting that reputational recovery could take time. While officers were engaging with schools on these issues, it was recognised as a complex area where change was difficult to implement quickly.

Members referred to the report's description of the borough as a net exporter of pupils and asked for clarification as to why families were choosing schools outside the borough. Officers advised that the absence of grammar schools within the borough was a contributing factor, as was the location of some schools near borough boundaries, where the nearest school for some families was outside Hillingdon. Officers highlighted a new school recently built just beyond the borough boundary which could draw pupils who would otherwise have attended schools within Hillingdon.

Members sought clarification on the reported decline in nursery numbers, questioning whether the figures reflected a drop in birth rates or whether they were influenced by parental choices about sending their children to nursery. Officers explained that it was a combination of both factors. While falling birth rates were a significant contributor, officers were also working to increase take-up of nursery places, particularly in light of expanded childcare entitlements. There was an early years and childcare sufficiency document, separate from the SOP. Officers also highlighted work underway to expand school-based nursery provision, including provision for two-year-olds, while acknowledging competition from private, voluntary and independent providers offering longer hours and holiday provision.

Members noted that the headline figure of a 28% reduction could be misleading if it did not solely reflect birth rate changes and cautioned that it could give the impression of a more severe future capacity issue in primary schools. Officers confirmed that the figures presented were based on the school census, and agreed that further contextual

information would be helpful. It was proposed that additional early years data could be incorporated into the next annual update of the School Organisation Plan.

Members raised a question regarding sixth-form capacity, noting a significantly higher level of spare capacity compared to lower secondary year groups, and asked whether this suggested a need to encourage more pupils to remain in borough for post-16 education. Officers advised that they would review the relevant data and provide a fuller response outside the meeting.

Members raised a point regarding spare capacity in primary schools, noting that falling rolls were expected to continue, and asked whether officers had considered undertaking a detailed assessment of capacity across primary schools and education planning areas to support future planning, including inclusive provision. Officers confirmed that work was already underway to assess school capacity and that schools had been asked to provide information on available space. Officers explained that they were exploring creative uses of spare capacity, including alternative provision, tuition services, SEND provision, and other potentially income-generating activities. However, they advised that further clarity on SEND reforms was awaited, particularly regarding expectations around inclusion bases in secondary schools, before final decisions could be made. Officers emphasised that making use of existing space, rather than constructing new provision, would be preferable where possible, and confirmed that this work would continue to develop.

RESOLVED: That the Children, Families & Education Select Committee:

- 1. Considered the updated School Organisation Plan with the latest data and forecasts; and**
- 2. Delegated comments to be included in the Cabinet Member report to the Democratic Services Officer in conjunction with the Chair and in consultation with the Opposition Lead**

74. PROPOSAL TO AMALGAMATE WHITEHALL INFANT SCHOOL AND WHITEHALL JUNIOR SCHOOL (Agenda Item 7)

Officers introduced the report on the proposal to amalgamate Whitehall Infant School and Whitehall Junior School.

Members were advised that similar amalgamation proposals had previously been considered by the Committee and that this proposal formed part of the authority's wider approach to supporting school sustainability. School amalgamation was one of the mechanisms available to improve financial stability, governance, and long-term viability for schools, particularly in the context of falling pupil numbers.

Members asked about the outcome of the consultation and whether there was general support for the proposal from parents and staff. Officers explained that an informal consultation had already taken place, during which 90 responses had been received. Of those, 58% were in favour of the proposed amalgamation. The formal consultation was ongoing. Engagement events had been held with parents and school staff and feedback received to date had been generally positive.

Members asked what the principal concerns were among those who did not support the proposal. Officers responded that the concerns raised were consistent with those seen in previous amalgamation proposals. These included anxieties about younger

infant pupils mixing with older junior pupils and concerns about the financial implications. Officers had sought to reassure parents that the schools would continue to operate in a way that avoided mixing of age groups.

RESOLVED: That the Children, Families & Education Select Committee:

- 1. Reviewed the proposal to amalgamate Whitehall Infant School and Whitehall Junior School, by closing Whitehall Infant School and extending the age range of the Junior School from 7-11 year olds, to 3-11 year olds; and**
- 2. Delegated comments to be included in the Cabinet report which will be presented on 23 April 2026 to the Democratic Services Officer in conjunction with the Chair and in consultation with the Opposition Lead**

75. **CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL MINUTES** (*Agenda Item 8*)

Members noted the minutes of the Corporate Parenting Panel.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the minutes

76. **FOSTERING REVIEW: FINAL REPORT** (*Agenda Item 9*)

This item was considered after item 5.

The Chair introduced the draft final report of the Committee's fostering review. Members were advised that the purpose of the item was to agree the final report and its submission to Cabinet.

Members thanked officers for the preparation of the report and noted the relatively short timescale of the review.

Members asked about officers' ambitions in terms of increasing the number of foster carers, and how many additional carers the service would ideally like to recruit. Officers advised that while increasing numbers was important, the primary focus was on recruiting the right type of foster carers, rather than achieving a specific target. There was particular difficulty in recruiting carers for adolescents and for children with significant trauma, mental health needs, or disabilities. As a result, the service intended to focus on more targeted recruitment, aligned to specific cohorts and needs, a point which was reflected in the Committee's recommendations.

Officers further explained that while a number of Cared for Children continued to be placed with external or out-of-borough foster carers, some of these placements were long-term and stable, and it would not be appropriate to disrupt them. However, there remained other children for whom having a wider choice of in-house foster carers would be beneficial. Officers reiterated the service's strong commitment to fostering and to foster carers, highlighting the significant progress made in recruitment. Members were informed that, to date in the current year, 17 new fostering households had been approved, compared with fewer than five approvals per year in previous years. Officers emphasised that these approvals reflected full completion of the assessment and panel process, which typically took eight to nine months. Officers expressed pride in the fostering team's achievements and gratitude to foster carers for their ongoing work, and thanked Members for the time and effort they had dedicated to the review.

	<p>RESOLVED: That the Select Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Agreed the final report for its review into fostering; 2. Delegated any final wording amendments to the Democratic Services Officer in conjunction with the Chair and in consultation with the Opposition Lead; and 3. Agreed the review's submission to Cabinet thereafter
77.	<p>FORWARD PLAN (<i>Agenda Item 10</i>)</p> <p>Members considered the Forward Plan.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families & Education Select Committee noted the Cabinet Forward Plan</p>
78.	<p>WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 11</i>)</p> <p>Members considered the Work Programme.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families & Education Select 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.