KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 21 October 2026.

PRESENT: Mr R G Streatfeild, MBE (Chair), Mr A Brady (Vice-Chair), Mr J Eustace, Mr A J Hook, Mr M A J Hood, Mr R Mayall (Substitute for Mr J Finch), Mr T Mole, Miss D Morton (Substitute for Mr J Defriend), Mrs B Porter (Substitute for Mr T Mallon), Mr H Rayner (Substitute for Mr B Barrett), Mr T L Shonk, Mr P Thomas and Mr D Truder

ALSO PRESENT: Mr B Collins, Mrs B Fordham, Mrs C Palmer and Mrs P Williams

IN ATTENDANCE: D/Supt E Banks (Kent Police), Ms D Bride (Assistant Director, Adolescents and Family Hubs), Ms J Harman (Interim Head of CONTEST and Serious Organised Crime (SOC)), Mrs C Head (Head of Finance Operations), Mr K Kasaven (Director of Children's Countywide Services), Ms C McInnes (Corporate Director Children, Young People and Education), Mr J McKay (Chief Accountant), ACC S Thompson (Kent Police), Mr B Watts (Deputy Chief Executive), Ms H Woodland (Corporate Director of Adult Social Care and Health) and Mrs A Taylor (Assistant Democratic Services Manager (Scrutiny))

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

72. Apologies and Substitutes

(Item A1)

Apologies were received from Mr Defriend, for whom Ms Morton was substituting, Mr Finch for whom Mr Mayall was substituting, Mr Mallon for whom Ms Porter was substituting and Mr Barrett for whom Mr Rayner was substituting. Apologies were also received from the Parent Governor and Church Representatives.

73. Declarations of Interests by Members in items on the Agenda for this Meeting

(Item A2)

Mr Mole declared that he was Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee.

74. Minutes of the meeting held on 23 September 2026

(Item A3)

It was requested that the minutes (at para 7c) be amended to reflect that officers had agreed to review, update and improve the Family Hub directory of services, particularly the information available for young people.

RESOLVED that, subject to the amendment set out above, the minutes of the meeting held on 23 September 2026 were a correct record and they be signed by the Chair.

75. Group Based Child Sexual Exploitation
(Item C1)

1. The Deputy Cabinet Member and officers introduced the report, which considered how effectively KCC and partner agencies identified, prevented and responded to group-based child sexual exploitation in Kent following the Casey National Audit. Members were advised that exploitation was a form of risk outside the home and could be difficult to identify because children might not recognise or disclose that they were being harmed. Effective safeguarding therefore depended on awareness among families, communities and professionals, the collation of information held by different agencies and timely multi-agency action.

2. Officers outlined the statutory, operational and partnership arrangements in place, including annual quality assurance activity, contextual safeguarding processes, the exploitation toolkit and joint work with Kent Police, health and other partners. Positive findings from external inspections were noted, alongside areas requiring further improvement, including safeguarding arrangements for care leavers and more consistent identification, assessment and recording of exploitation risks.

3. Members sought assurance regarding implementation of the Casey recommendations. Officers confirmed that an action plan could be brought forward through KCC's governance processes to an appropriate Member led committee. Discussion included the need for clear ownership, deadlines and measures of success; improved collection and analysis of victim and suspect demographic information; and sufficiently regular public reporting to support effective Member oversight.

4. The Committee considered the safeguarding of children placed in Kent by other local authorities. Officers advised that approximately 1,250 children were placed in Kent by around 90 authorities and that placing authorities were required to notify KCC through the established process. Information supplied could be recorded securely, and local authorities were contacted regularly where records required correction or completion.

5. Concern was raised regarding the accessibility of routes for reporting concerns about children. Members referred to the length and complexity of the online referral process and the risk that this could discourage residents or professionals from providing information. Officers confirmed that concerns could also be reported by telephone, with staff recording the information on behalf of the caller, and that Family Hub staff could support referrals. It was acknowledged that further work was required to ensure staff, Members and the public understood the available routes and that these were as straightforward as possible.

6. Officers explained that the exploitation toolkit had been revised after quality assurance work found it was used less consistently outside adolescent services and was considered difficult to follow. The revised toolkit provided a clearer route through identification, assessment and response, had been relaunched through workforce training and would continue to be audited. It was emphasised that failure to record use of the toolkit did not necessarily mean that safeguarding action had not taken place.

7. Members discussed the limitations of the available prevalence data. Officers advised that KCC operated a live dashboard for children open to social care, drawing together a range of vulnerability indicators. Approximately 110 children were then identified as having an exploitation risk, with the overall number having remained broadly stable over five years, although the nature of the risks had changed. The dashboard did not include children known only to other agencies and did not yet distinguish consistently between different types of exploitation. Further work, together with anticipated national guidance and statutory returns, was expected to enable more detailed analysis and comparison between authorities from 2028.

8. The Committee received an update on the East Kent child sexual exploitation pilot. Officers advised that the pilot involved a small number of children and brought agencies together to share information and respond proactively. It remained at an early stage and had not yet been evaluated; further information on the timetable and learning would be provided.

9. Kent Police advised that the number of active group-based child sexual exploitation investigations had increased from 13 in the report to 15, involving 53 suspects. An active case meant a live investigation, and group-based offending was defined nationally as involving two or more associated suspects sexually exploiting children. Twenty-two such cases had been identified during the previous 12 months. The investigations related to victims living in Kent, although suspects could be located elsewhere.

10. Police representatives reported that dedicated specialist teams, national definitions, improved training and analytical arrangements had strengthened the force's understanding of the issue. However, child sexual exploitation remained underreported and it was not possible to state that the full extent was known. Kent Police had reviewed 355 historic cases dating back to 2010 which displayed possible indicators of group-based exploitation; the national team was reviewing those cases against the agreed definition. Awareness activity included the national "I Am Ready" campaign, through which one closed case had so far been referred back for review, and a planned public campaign intended to encourage further reporting.

11. Members were advised that the group-based definition related to contact offending, although offending could be facilitated online. Kent Police shared information with national programmes to identify cross-border links and prepared annual problem profiles to identify areas of concern and target prevention and disruption activity. Detailed location information was not routinely published where it contained operational intelligence. Current cases were more prevalent in urban areas, reflecting the distribution of children and young people.

12. The Committee discussed criminal justice outcomes and the complexity of progressing cases. Kent Police reported one conviction during the previous 12 months and two cases then at trial. Investigations could be lengthy because children might not initially recognise themselves as victims, evidence often had to be assembled from multiple sources and cases required close work with the Crown Prosecution Service. Members were reminded that safeguarding thresholds differed from the evidential test required for prosecution and that

figures for children assessed as at risk could not be compared directly with recorded offences, suspects or prosecutions.

13. Discussion took place regarding demographic information. Kent Police confirmed that ethnicity data was held but was affected by data-quality limitations, including reliance on self-defined information. Of the active investigations, 54% of suspects were recorded as White British, 1.9% within combined Asian categories and 5.7% as being of mixed background. Police representatives stated that the available information did not indicate disproportionality when compared with census data, but recording was being improved in line with national requirements. Members emphasised that future reporting should include victim and suspect demographics, deprivation and other relevant drivers, with appropriate context and safeguards against misleading interpretation.

14. Members highlighted the vulnerability of 15 to 17-year-olds, care leavers and unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, and the relevance of wider youth provision and early intervention. Officers clarified that the most recent inspection had found services for care leavers required improvement to be good, rather than being inadequate, and advised that an action plan had already been considered by the Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee. Members also discussed adultification, the importance of treating exploited children as victims and the contribution of Family Hubs and district contextual safeguarding meetings to early identification and coordinated action.

15. The Committee considered the effect of the loss of access to the Eurodac database following the UK's departure from the European Union. Members proposed that the Government be asked to consider restoring an effective route to relevant information held by European partners where this could assist age assessments and the safeguarding of unaccompanied children.

16. In concluding the discussion, the Chair noted the seriousness of the issue, the importance of continued cross-agency working and the need for improved reporting, transparency and comparable data while protecting live investigations and sensitive information. Members requested future reporting on the revised exploitation toolkit; provision and safeguarding for 15 to 17-year-olds; the effectiveness of action relating to care leavers; live and disaggregated data, including demographics and drivers; and progress against the Casey recommendations. It was also agreed that officers, the Chair and spokespeople of the Scrutiny Committee, the Executive and the relevant Cabinet Member should examine the most appropriate mechanism for dedicated, focused work on the Casey findings, and the most appropriate way to report back to Members.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee:

a) note the assurance provided by the established statutory, operational and partnership arrangements and the limitations in current prevalence and impact data;

b) endorse continued oversight of the Casey benchmarking actions, the multi-agency Child Exploitation Strategy and action plan, and targeted case scrutiny through the Kent Safeguarding Children Multi-Agency Partnership governance structure;

c) request that the Chairman and Spokespeople of the Scrutiny Committee, with Officers and the Executive determine the appropriate route for dedicated, focused examination of the Casey recommendations and action plan (including demographics and drivers); and

d) request that future reporting include progress on the revised exploitation toolkit, services for 15 to 17-year-olds, action relating to the heightened risk posed to care leavers and how effective this has been;

e) requests that the Cabinet Member writes to the Government requesting that access to relevant European information-sharing arrangements, including Eurodac be restored.

76. Revenue and Capital Budget Forecast Outturn Report – Quarter 1
(Item C2)

1. The item was introduced by the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Corporate and Traded Services, who advised that the report set out the Quarter 1 position and did not represent the Council's current financial position. Members were informed that the Quarter 2 figures were expected shortly and that work continued with finance officers, directorates and Cabinet Members to address the forecast variances.

2. Members discussed the timing of financial reporting and expressed concern that Quarter 1 information was being considered after the end of Quarter 2. The Cabinet Member confirmed that discussions had taken place with officers about improving the speed of reporting and accepted the importance of closer alignment between the production of monitoring information and its scrutiny by Members.

3. In response to questions regarding the overall forecast, the Cabinet Member advised that financial monitoring was continuous and that discussions with directorates were not confined to the formal quarterly reports. Officers explained that the principal pressures were within Children, Young People and Education and Adult Social Care and Health, and that mitigating action continued to be taken.

4. Members considered the relationship between the SEND reform plan and the Dedicated Schools Grant position. Officers advised that the Department for Education had returned the draft plan later than anticipated and that further work was required before formal agreement. It had, however, been confirmed in principle that the plan contained sufficient clarity to release a substantial contribution towards the accumulated Dedicated Schools Grant deficit. Members were advised that requests for statutory assessment and Education, Health and Care Plans had increased nationally during the period of reform and that the intended longer-term direction was to reduce costs through earlier and more inclusive support.

5. The Committee examined the forecast overspend on looked after children's placements. Officers explained that the number of children entering care had risen by approximately 50 from May, although this was within the range normally experienced in Kent and the increase had begun to reduce. The principal pressure arose from the availability and cost of placements, including a shortage

of foster carers and greater reliance on independent residential provision. Work included increasing in-house provision, recruiting and retaining foster carers, challenging placement decisions and costs, reviewing high-cost placements promptly, negotiating with providers and seeking appropriate health contributions. Members were advised that the forecast pressure had reduced between Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 and that the average placement cost had returned to approximately the level recorded a year earlier.

6. Discussion took place regarding the reported increase in residential placement costs and the arrangements for Member oversight of contracts. Officers confirmed that commissioning teams monitored placement quality and cost, challenged provision and removed expenditure where services were not being delivered.

7. Members considered capital rephasing and sought assurance that deferred projects were reassessed where costs might have changed. Officers confirmed that revised business cases were required where appropriate. Particular concern was raised regarding delays to the proposed special schools in Whitstable and Swanley. Officers advised that both schemes were being delivered by the Department for Education, that the Whitstable scheme was affected by an outstanding village green application and that the Swanley site had been cleared by KCC but awaited further action by the Department. KCC remained in regular contact with the Department and had offered to take the projects forward directly.

8. In response to a question about the Capital Programme and £32.5million underspend and quantifying the effect of rephasing delays to the Council's budget the officer offered to respond outside of the meeting.

9. In relation to adult social care, officers advised that part of the forecast pressure arose from savings which were no longer expected to be achieved in-year and from lower projected income. Members discussed joint funding under section 117 of the Mental Health Act. Officers confirmed that mediation with health partners had concluded with a recommendation, although work remained to resolve historic payments and agree a more equitable future funding arrangement. Demographic pressures were reported as broadly stable, with fewer older people entering services but an increase in working-age adults requiring support for mental health needs.

10. The Committee considered the growth in expenditure on independent special school placements. Officers advised that Kent had above-average numbers of children with Education, Health and Care Plans and in specialist provision. Independent placements would remain necessary for some children, but work continued to increase inclusive mainstream provision, special resource provision and local maintained capacity. Members heard that independent providers did not always represent value for money and that the Council used commissioning arrangements to manage quality, safeguarding and cost where possible. The forthcoming provision plan and SEND reform plan would provide further detail for Member consideration.

11. Questions were also raised regarding treasury management, early debt redemption, the oversight of Council-owned companies, investment income and external factors affecting the budget. The Cabinet Member advised that two further loans were being considered for early repayment, subject to confirmation

of the relevant terms, and that Council companies remained subject to ongoing shareholder oversight. Officers explained that investment income and cash-flow requirements could fluctuate during the year and that the treasury position was reviewed regularly.

12. Members emphasised the need for future monitoring reports to distinguish clearly between pressures arising from Council decisions and those caused by external organisations, market conditions or national policy. It was agreed that further information would be provided on capital rephasing, the effect of delays, the relevant interest rates and the assumptions underlying savings and income targets. The Committee also requested that future reporting support timely scrutiny of the evolving financial position.

13. Following the earlier discussion Mr Rayner proposed and Mr Hood seconded that the looked after children's care and support placements contract be reviewed urgently by an appropriate Member review group.

14. This was put to the vote, and the voting was as follows:

For (5)
Mr A Brady, Mr A Hook, Mr M Hood, Mr H Rayner and Mr P Thomas

Against (7)
Mr J Eustace, Mr R Mayall, Mr T Mole, Ms D Morton, Ms B Porter, Mr T Shonk, Mr D Truder

Motion lost

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee note the Revenue and Capital Budget Forecast Outturn Report – Quarter 1.

77. SEND reform and sustainability
(Item C3)

1. The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills introduced the item and explained that the presentation provided an overview of the work undertaken to date and the next stages of the SEND reform programme.

2. Officers outlined the timetable following publication of the Government's SEND reform proposals in February 2026. KCC had been asked by the Department for Education in March to prepare a co-produced SEND reform plan for submission in June. Key national guidance, including guidance concerning the Experts at Hand model, had been received shortly before the submission deadline. The draft plan had been submitted on time and feedback from the Department for Education had been received on 2 October 2026. Members were advised that the plan had sufficient clarity to enable the High Needs Stability Grant to be released in principle, although further detail was required before formal sign-off, particularly regarding the delivery of Experts at Hand.

3. The Committee was advised that KCC's area SEND inspection had commenced shortly after submission of the draft reform plan. The inspection outcome, published in September, found inconsistent experiences and outcomes for

children and young people with SEND. Officers considered the judgement fair and emphasised the progress made since the previous inspection, while recognising that further improvement was required. A local area improvement plan was being prepared for submission within 50 working days and was available for public consultation. The plan would be considered by the Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee in November, with the updated SEND reform plan expected to follow in January.

4. Officers reported substantial improvement in the timeliness of Education, Health and Care Plans, with approximately 70% completed within the statutory 20-week period and no child generally waiting longer than 25 weeks, compared with delays of up to two years previously. Progress had also been made in strengthening mainstream inclusion, including an annual schools conference attended by approximately 900 delegates and closer working between mainstream schools, special schools and alternative provision.

5. Members discussed geographical variation in services and the risk of a postcode lottery. Officers described work to establish consistent countywide arrangements, including a single speech and language therapy contract and the planned expansion of the PINS and This Is Me programmes. Those programmes had supported schools and families to identify and meet neurodiverse needs earlier and had been associated with fewer requests for statutory assessment in the pilot area. A countywide rollout was planned over three years, prioritised according to need.

6. The Committee heard that the Balance System had improved access to speech and language support by combining specialist intervention with training for parents and school staff. A similar approach was being considered for occupational therapy. Experts at Hand would integrate existing specialist teaching and support services and enable schools to obtain advice more directly, without unnecessary application processes.

7. Members welcomed the progress reported but stressed that further improvement remained necessary and that communication with parents and families should be strengthened. Officers confirmed that communication had been identified as an area for development and that SEND roadshows, Family Hubs, improved internal communication and a wider communications strategy would form part of the response.

8. The Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee made the following statement which he asked to be noted in the minutes:

“We have been aware of the delays to the SEND Reform Plan, and we made a deliberate decision to wait until we had the completed plan in front of us, rather than try to consider it in parts.

We now expect the full plan to come before CYPE on 26 November.

I want to be very clear that I fully recognise and respect the independent role of Scrutiny. SEND is enormously important to our children and families, and it is absolutely right that proposals in this area receive proper examination.

My point today is simply about how we sequence that scrutiny and how we make the best use of our respective committees.

I believe the sensible approach is to allow CYPE to consider the completed plan on 26 November. We can then see what issues emerge from that discussion and where further scrutiny might genuinely add value.

That does not close the door on further scrutiny. Quite the opposite. It means any further examination can be focused on the areas where Scrutiny can make the greatest contribution.

I am keen that CYPE and Scrutiny should complement each other, rather than unintentionally duplicate each other's work.

And perhaps there is a wider lesson here. Going forward, a little more communication and coordination between the Chairs would help us make sure that important issues such as SEND receive the thorough consideration they deserve, while making the best use of everyone's time.

So, my request is quite straightforward: let CYPE consider the completed plan on 26 November and then let us collectively consider where further scrutiny would add value."

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee note the presentation and the update provided.

78. Work Programme
(Item D1)

1. Members were encouraged to use the agenda-setting process and to submit proposed items at an early stage so that sufficient time could be allowed for the preparation of reports and attendance by relevant Cabinet Members and officers. The Chair confirmed that the next agenda-setting meeting would take place on 3 November 2026.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee note the Work Programme.