

## KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

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### SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 23 March 2022.

PRESENT: Mr A Booth (Chairman), Mr P V Barrington-King (Vice-Chairman), Mr N J Collor, Mrs S Hudson, Mr D Jeffrey, Mr R C Love, OBE, Mr H Rayner, Dr L Sullivan, Mr A J Hook and Mr M Hood

ALSO PRESENT: Mr R W Gough (Leader of the Council), Mr D L Brazier (Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport), Mrs S Prendergast (Cabinet Member for Education and Skills) and Ms M Dawkins

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr S Jones (Corporate Director for Growth, Environment and Transport), Mrs S Hammond (Director of Integrated Children's Services), Mrs A Taylor (Scrutiny Research Officer) and Mr M Dentten (Democratic Services Officer)

IN VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE: Mrs R Binks, Mrs S Chandler (Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services), Mr B Watts (General Counsel) and Mr P Lightowler (Interim Director of Transport)

### UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

#### **33. Declarations of Interests by Members in items on the Agenda for this Meeting** *(Item A3)*

No declarations were made.

#### **34. Minutes of the meeting held on 20 January 2022** *(Item A4)*

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 20 January 2022 were an accurate record and that they be signed by the Chairman.

#### **35. SEND Transport Update** *(Item A5)*

*Mr D Brazier, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport; and Mrs S Prendergast, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills were in attendance and Mrs S Chandler, Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services; and Mr B Watts, General Counsel were in virtual attendance for this item.*

1. The Chairman addressed the Committee's future consideration of the Home to School Transport Short Focus Inquiry (SFI) report. He recognised that the recent issue with SEND transport fell within the subject area of the SFI and that the internal audit review needed to be respected. The Chairman agreed to

discuss the timing of the report consideration with Opposition Group Leaders following the meeting.

2. Mr Watts, as Monitoring Officer, gave an update on the internal audit review of SEND transport. He confirmed that he and the Head of Internal Audit had met with Kent Parents and Carers Together (PACT) to gather first-hand accounts of their experiences. He reassured Members that the Head of Internal Audit would meet with Kent PACT throughout the review. It was explained that the review was in its fact-finding stage. He informed the Committee that he had met with Group Leaders, with further meetings on the issue planned. He agreed to share further updates and information with the Committee throughout the review process.
3. Mr Brazier explained that Cabinet Members and officers had met regularly to discuss the situation since the previous Scrutiny Committee meeting. He confirmed that daily situation reports were shared between directorates. Mr Jones shared the steps undertaken to address parent complaints and issues raised, which included working with parents directly on modifications to make routes as short as possible. He verified that the volume of complaints had reduced.
4. Mrs Prendergast reassured Members that she had met with Kent PACT on multiple occasions to understand parent and child experiences as well as any ongoing issues.
5. A Member asked what impact the review had on Internal Audit operations, including whether additional external resource was required. Mr Watts confirmed that the review was being prioritised within the existing resource, with the review factored into the audit plan in order to manage service capacity.
6. A Member asked what reassurance could be given to parents to explain that an internal review was the most appropriate measure. Mr Watts confirmed that the Head of Internal Audit had a range of professional duties which prevented him from being influenced by Members or officers throughout the review process, which ensured an impartial and transparent review.

RESOLVED that the update be noted.

**36. 21/00124 - Kent Travel Saver Price Increase**  
(Item B1)

*Mr D Brazier, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport; and Mr S Jones, Corporate Director for Growth, Environment and Transport were in attendance and Mr P Lightowler, Interim Director for Transport was in virtual attendance for this item.*

1. The Chairman introduced the item and invited the proposer of the call-in, Ms Dawkins, to provide an overview of the reasons for her call-in. Mr Hood as the seconder was also invited to speak.

2. Ms Dawkins set out the reasons for her call-in. She stated that the decision was not made in line with the Council's policy framework, as the increase in the price of the Kent Travel Saver pass was likely to increase car usage, which went against the climate commitments made within the Kent and Medway Low Emissions Strategy and Outcome 4 of Local Transport Plan 4: Delivering Growth without Gridlock 2016–2031, 'to deliver schemes to reduce the environmental footprint of transport.' Mr Hood shared his concern that no environmental impact assessment had been carried out and asserted that the decision would impact air quality and congestion around schools.
3. The Chairman invited Mr Brazier to provide an overview of the decision.
4. Mr Brazier gave an overview of the decision, to increase the cost of the Kent Travel Saver pass from £370 to £450. He informed Members that the Pass was a discretionary scheme and stressed that savings could only be made from non-statutory services. He recognised the difficulty of setting a balanced budget and the resulting financial impact that the change would have on residents purchasing the pass. He stated that the prospect of abandoning the scheme and subsidy would have had a greater negative impact on residents than the decision to increase the price of the Pass. He confirmed that increasing the cost allowed KCC to maintain the scheme in the 2022/23 financial year. He accepted that whilst there was a possibility that car use would increase, there was no evidence to indicate that the decision would have an adverse environmental impact.
5. Mr Lightowler explained that approximately 4,000 passes were provided free of charge annually, including to children within the Council's care. He confirmed that the decision did not impact the low-income or sibling pass concessions. He reminded Members that the Kent Travel Saver could be paid for in monthly instalments and noted that the scheme was unique amongst county councils. He verified that the decision did not impact the Public Transport provision within the Reconnect Programme.
6. A Member asked that an equality questionnaire be included as a section within the pass application, in order to inform future decisions and understand the impact of changes on pass users.
7. A Member asked what other options were considered before the decision was taken. Mr Brazier confirmed that a 5% price increase was rejected as a viable option as it would not reduce the net cost of the scheme to an extent that mitigated budget saving pressures.
8. A Member noted that, given current high fuel prices, the pass provided good value for money, which would be enhanced with further fuel price increases.
9. Mr Jeffrey moved and Mr Love seconded recommendation (a) "that the Scrutiny Committee make no comments".
10. Members voted on the motion. The motion was carried.

RESOVLED that the Scrutiny Committee make no comments.

### **37. Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and Asylum Update** *(Item C1)*

*Mr R Gough, Leader of the Council; Mr M Dunkley CBE, Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Education; and Mrs S Hammond, Director Integrated Children's Services (Social Work Lead) were in attendance and Mrs S Chandler, Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services was in virtual attendance for this item.*

1. Mrs Chandler gave a verbal overview of the written update on Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and Asylum, since the protocol between Kent County Council, the Home Office and Department for Education was initiated in September 2021. She recognised that transfers had not happened in the desired timeframe, which was linked to volume and other authorities taking UASC into their care for the first time. She confirmed that the most vulnerable children and young people were prioritised. Mr Dunkley stated that he was satisfied that the appropriate mechanisms were in place to handle and care for UASC. Mrs Hammond added that there had been a decrease in the use of hotels for UASC over winter, though it was recognised that the number of UASC entering Kent by boat had increased substantially over the previous 10 days in particular.
2. Mr Gough highlighted the resettlement scheme as an example of successful local-central government collaboration and assured Members that KCC was ready to work with government on its response to the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis.
3. Members noted that the number of UASC entering Kent in January 2022 had significantly increased when compared to previous years.
4. Following a question from a Member, Mrs Chandler confirmed that the maximum number of UASC in KCC's care was capped at 242, plus an additional 120 who would be transferred under the National Transfer Scheme within 10 working days, in line with the protocol.
5. Mrs Hammond was asked what impact recent UASC volumes had on social workers and services. She confirmed that there were two types of UASC social work, long-term dealing with permanent care and short-term handling reception and initial care. She noted that social workers had volunteered to be involved with UASC care, with the service meeting demand since September 2021.
6. In relation to immigration status, Mrs Hammond informed the Committee that 10-15% of UASC in KCC's care became adults without their status confirmed. She reassured Members that it took 13 weeks for UASC to qualify for care leaver status and that KCC worked with the Home Office throughout the process.

7. A Member asked how UASC schooling and language support was arranged and funded. Mrs Hammond confirmed that there were permanent English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) arrangements in schools and further education colleges, as well as interpreter support, which were government grant funded.
8. Mrs Hammond reassured Members that there was a clear protocol between KCC, Kent Police and the Home Office for handling UASC missing before transfer. She explained that the protocol was under constant review and took account of national police data. She added that upon arrival social workers asked UASC whether they had any existing contacts in the UK, with the susceptibility for exploitation taken into account.
9. The Chairman recognised the sacrifices made by voluntary organisations, especially the RNLI, involved in facilitating the safe passage of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children.
10. The Chairman thanked Mr Gough, Mrs Chandler and Mrs Hammond for the report and commended the work of Cabinet and senior officers in lobbying the government for fairer outcomes for Kent.

RESOLVED to note:

- a) the number of UASC Kent County Council has accommodated since 10 September 2021 and the significant contribution this has made to reducing the number of UASC in hotels used by the Home Office since Summer 2021; and
- b) the refugee resettlement that is taking place within Kent under official government schemes.

### **38. Work Programme**

*(Item D1)*

1. A further update on Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and Asylum was added to the work programme.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.