

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 16 July 2025.

PRESENT: Mr R G Streatfeild, MBE (Chair), Mr A Brady (Vice-Chair), Mr W Chapman, Mr J Eustace, Mrs G Foster, Mr M A J Hood (Substitute for Rich Lehmann), Mr A J Hook, Mr T Mole, Ms A Randall (Substitute for Mr S Dixon), Mr H Rayner (Substitute for Mrs S Hudson), Mrs S Roots (Substitute for Dr G Sturley) and Mr D Sian (Substitute for Ms I Kemp)

ALSO PRESENT: Mrs B Fordham, Mr M Fraser Moat, Mr C Hespe and Miss D Morton

IN ATTENDANCE: Mrs A Beer (Chief Executive), Mrs S Hammond (Corporate Director Children, Young People and Education), Mr R Smith (Corporate Director Adult Social Care and Health), Mr B Watts (General Counsel), Ms C McInnes (Director of Education & SEND), Mr D Shipton (Head of Finance Policy, Planning and Strategy), Mr M Albiston (Director of Adult Social Care (Operations) Kent), Mr C Chapman (Assistant Director - Fair Access and (Interim) SEN Processes), Ms H Gillivan (Interim Director Adults and Integrated Commissioning.), Ms A Gleave (Interim Assistant Director for SEND Operations), Miss M Goldsmith (Finance Business Partner - Adult Social Care and Health), Ms S Hill (Director Adult Social Care) Ms T Pereira (Head of Service Improvement) and Mrs A Taylor (Assistant Democratic Services Manager (Scrutiny))

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

1. Election of Vice-Chair (Item A2)

1. Mr Hook proposed, and Mr Rayner seconded that Mr Alister Brady be elected as Vice-Chair of the Scrutiny Committee.
2. As there were no further nominations, the Chairman declared Mr Alister Brady as Vice-Chair of the Committee.

RESOLVED that Mr Alister Brady be elected as Vice-Chair of the Scrutiny Committee.

2. Apologies and Substitutes (Item A3)

Apologies were received by Mr Lehmann, Mrs Hudson, Mr Sturley and Mrs Kemp.

Mr Hood, Mr Rayner, Mrs Roots and Mr Sian were all present as substitutes.

Membership update: Since the publication of the agenda, Ms Randall had joined the Committee as a permanent member and Mr Dixon had ceased his membership of the Committee in view of his deputy Cabinet Member responsibilities.

3. Declarations of Interests by Members in items on the Agenda for this Meeting
(Item A4)

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Minutes of the meeting held on 18 March, 10 April and 22 May 2025
(Item A5)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 18 March, 10 April, 22 May 2025 be approved as a correct record.

5. Kent's Adult Social Care Services - Local Authority Assessment Improvement Plan
(Item C1)

1. The report was introduced by Diane Morton, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health, who provided an overview and context surrounding the Care Quality Commission (CQC) assessment of Kent County Council's Adult Social Care function.
2. Mr Richard Smith, Director of Adult Social Care, outlined the strategic timeline post-Covid, the 'requires improvement' outcome of the assessment and the steps taken since March 2024 to achieve improvement.
3. It was confirmed that there was a £45 million overspend rolled over from the previous year within the Adult Social Care Directorate that was offset by savings in other areas of the Council.
4. In response to comments and questions from guests and Members the discussion covered the following:
 - Regarding Appendix 2, Mr Smith outlined the areas of success within the improvement plan which included moving staff into community teams and the approach to innovation and transitions between children's and adult services. Safeguarding referrals were identified as an area requiring further monitoring as well as strategic partnerships in which Miss Morton detailed future plans for a Partnership Communication Board.
 - Concerns on the net overspend of £35.5 million were contextualised by the national issue of demand outstripping resources with a 4% gap in demand and funding within Kent also being reflected in the national overspend. Emphasis was placed on the complexity of balancing savings programmes and the statutory obligation to meet assessed care needs as well as an overview on preventative measures to reduce demand for social care. The financial relationship with the NHS was also addressed, with various degrees of satisfaction existing across different areas of care.
 - The key area of the improvement plan that posed the greatest challenge was ensuring consistency across the service. Tricia Pereira, Head of Service Improvement, also identified remaining key areas, including raising awareness towards accurate safeguarding referrals, investment in workforce, improving workflow, and utilising technology.
 - An unpaid carers online assessment tool had been launched, for which work to raise awareness and accessibility was being reviewed.
 - It was confirmed that there were no cost efficiencies or savings set against the Ring-Fenced Grant for domestic violence.

- Steps had been taken to improve staff survey results, including the incorporation of feedback from 24 community teams across Kent into future planning. A summary of improvements to the review and reassessment process was also provided by Mark Albiston, Director of Adult Social Care (Operations), with sustainable improvements made across several targets, despite further overall progress still being required. Details were shared on the forward-looking approach to transition services into Adult Social Care including moving the 18–25 year-old strengthening independence services back to the Adult Social Care directorate.
5. Following the questions, the Chair welcomed comments and views from the Committee about the report. These included:
 - Concern was raised regarding the ongoing overspend in the Adult Social Care budget, and the effectiveness of current arrangements in ensuring future savings.
 - Support for the Plan was expressed alongside scepticism on whether Local Government Reform would hinder the development of important new strategies.
 - A Member queried the impact of central government changes to National Insurance on the Adult Social Care budget, and whether additional budgetary provisions would be made as a result.
 - Structural changes to induce savings such as a reduction in the overreliance on the private sector and a focus on domiciliary care to reduce the need for complex care interventions were posed by a Member.
 - Clarification was required about the specific impacts and decisions that were taken as the result of the CQC report and whether this would be signposted in future reports.
 - A Member posed a question on the budgetary impact of the removal of overseas care workers visas.
 6. The Chairman called on the Cabinet Member to provide comments and clarifications on the Member's points of debates:
 - Miss Morton acknowledged the comments made by Members and highlighted the upcoming Casey Review, National Insurance contributions and Employment Bill as having potential future impacts on the Adult Social Care provision.
 - In response to questions regarding increasing the Adult Social Care budget, Mr Smith highlighted the financial constraints imposed by central government and the Council's statutory duty to deliver services within these limitations.
 7. The Chairman proposed to note the report and request that the Adult Social Care and Public Health Cabinet Committee adds to its work programme a further review of the Improvement Plan, specifically in relation to the eight bullet points on page 23 of the Scrutiny Committee report, giving regard to the budget position of the Adult Social Care & Health Directorate. This was seconded by Mr Eustace and agreed by the Committee.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee note the report and requests that the Adult Social Care and Public Health Cabinet Committee adds to its work programme a further review of the Improvement Plan, specifically in relation to the eight bullet points on page 23 of the Scrutiny Committee report, giving regard to the budget position of the Adult Social Care & Health Directorate.

6. Special Educational Needs and Disability - Quarterly Update (Item C2)

1. The report was introduced by Mrs Beverley Fordham, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, who outlined the challenges currently facing Educational and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Services. She also set out her strategy to ensure assessment and support systems were available early in children's development.
2. Mrs Christine McInnes, Director of Education and SEND, provided details of the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of the report and established the status of the referrals backlog and the Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).
3. In response to comments and questions from guests and Members the discussion covered the following:
 - Mrs McInnes outlined the stages of the Specialist Resource Provisions (SRPs) and the resulting net increase of 55 new SRPs in the report. She stated the progress was dependent on capital funding, allocated annually with a prioritisation process.
 - Mr Craig Chapman, Assistant Director - Fair Access and (Interim) SEN Processes, explained that the KPI target for EHCP waiting times of 20 weeks, was approximately 60% based on the average from the previous calendar year. As this target was being achieved, it was being reviewed and expected to increase.
 - Ongoing research was taking place on the reasons for higher EHCPs throughout Kent, however a shift to make support available throughout a child's development was emphasised by Mrs Fordham to reduce the overreliance on EHCPs to obtain support.
 - Bureaucratic reforms in favour of streamlining processes, rather than reducing funding or staff numbers, were ongoing. A successful pilot was underway to minimise disruption during the transition of SEN children into SEN schools that was set to roll out in September.
 - Ms Alice Gleave, Interim Assistant Director for SEND Operations, stated reports containing further data could be compiled and emphasised the ongoing systematic inquiries into the quality of EHCPs. Following a low-quality assessment of plans in 2022, development in quality assurance had occurred.
 - Mr Chapman provided an overview of the reasons behind higher numbers of EHCP applications, highlighting the increased presence of SEN in the public consciousness. He discussed the monitoring of elective home education and the legal limitations that restricted access to home spaces. He also referenced the ceasing of EHCPs as a mutual agreement with parents, typically taking place during transition points.
 - Regarding early years intervention, Mrs Sarah Hammond, Corporate Director Children, Young People and Education, established the timeline and research behind the development of the family hub. The importance of early development was also highlighted, specifically on investment in toilet training and hearing assessments.
 - Concerning the Safety Valve on page 131 of the report, Mrs Fordham acknowledged the anticipated £10 million off the accumulated deficit position at March 2025. She addressed this issue of overspend, outlining measures to control provision and reduce outsourcing. Delays were also recognised in the funding of two new schools by the Department of Education (DfE), contributing to high costs.
 - At the point of an EHCP needs assessment, schools were requested to provide necessary information and the response rates to this were high.

- Mrs McInnes provided context to the progression of reports and delays to discussions to ensure alignment with the forthcoming government White Paper.
4. Following the questions, the Chair welcomed comments and views from the Committee about the report. These included:
 - Several Members requested that future reports include additional data regarding ensuring quality of EHCPs, rationale behind EHCP application decisions, specifics of SEND and NHS partnerships.
 - The importance of early intervention and building trust was emphasised, alongside development of technology to streamline administrative processes and ensure improved outcomes for children.
 - Factors were explored to explain the disparity between numbers of children requiring SEN and numbers of EHCP referrals within Kent such as genetic factors.
 5. The Chairman proposed that the report be noted and requested that the quarterly SEND reporting be added to the work programme for the Children, Young People and Education (CYPE) Cabinet Committee. The Scrutiny Committee would focus on the strategic issues regarding SEND provision in Kent and requested a report, at an appropriate time, considering why Kent had a disproportionately high number of EHCPs, what systemic factors were driving this and how it could be addressed. The proposal was seconded by Mr Hood and agreed by the Committee.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee note the report and requests that quarterly SEND reporting be added to the work programme for the Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee.

The Scrutiny Committee will focus on the strategic issues regarding SEND provision in Kent and requests a report, at an appropriate time, considering why Kent has a disproportionately high number of EHCPs, what systemic factors are driving this and how it can be addressed.

7. Progress of the Kent Department of Local Government Efficiency (Item C3)

1. The report was introduced by Matthew Fraser Moat, Cabinet Member for Local Government Efficiency, who provided an overview of the work of the Kent Department of Local Government Efficiency (DOLGE) and the priorities of the administration to seek long-term efficiencies and improvements for Kent residents.
2. In response to comments and questions from guests and Members the discussion covered the following:
 - Mr Fraser Moat emphasised his financial approach to the DOLGE process, informed by his accountancy background and assured Members that all DOLGE work would go through officers and the relevant Committees.
 - Details building upon this report would be delivered at the September Full Council meeting via Cabinet Member proposals.
 - Mr Christopher Hespe, Deputy Cabinet Member for Finance and Cross-party activity, provided context of the financial situation inherited by the new administration and set the scope of DOLGE work. A new approach to shift focus towards statutory rather than discretionary services was detailed

alongside contracting and outsourcing arrangements to be re-examined. Work to identify future areas for savings was ongoing.

- Concerns were raised of the 12 unanswered questions on DOGE within the report and how interlinked DOGE and DOLGE public output was. Mr Fraser Moat encouraged that he be assessed upon his own record.
 - Members expressed their frustrations concerning certain social media posts that required clarifications on accuracy. This clarification was provided by Mrs Amanda Beer, Chief Executive Officer. The timeline by which KCC was able to respond to certain media interest was also established by Mrs Beer.
 - To ensure public confidence in KCC, it was acknowledged that greater granularity regarding the financial backing of specific items was necessary.
 - Mr Ben Watts, General Counsel, outlined how the DOLGE fell into individual Cabinet Member's portfolios, hence their inclusion in delivering updates. Specifically, the Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee would receive various outcomes on the work of DOLGE, unless the item fell within another Cabinet portfolio.
 - Mr Hespe paid tribute to the KCC officers in relation to their work on DOLGE.
3. The Chairman proposed, and Mr Eustace seconded, that under section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 5 of part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.
 4. This was agreed unanimously and Mr Watts, General Counsel updated Members on the legal advice given in relation to DOLGE and DOGE.
 5. As the Committee resumed its public session the Chair noted that the information contained within the public documents submitted to the committee was reflected in the exempt discussion had and that the public could be reassured with regards to the handling of their personal data, the County Council would continue to comply with the law in all respects.
 6. The Chair proposed to note the report and look forward to the Strategic Statement and detailed report on the Kent DOLGE. This was seconded by Mr Eustace and received assent from the Committee.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee note the report and look forward to the Strategic Statement and detailed report on the Kent DOLGE.

8. Work Programme

(Item D1)

RESOLVED to NOTE the Work Programme.