

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL
CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION CABINET
COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee held at Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Tuesday, 14th July, 2026.

PRESENT: Mr T Mole (Chairman), Mr J Finch, Mr J Baker, Mr R G Streatfeild, MBE, Mr A Kibble, Mr R Mayall, Ms C Nolan, Mr M Reidy, Ms C Russell, Mr T L Shonk, Mr P Stepto, Dr G Sturley and Mr P Thomas

ALSO PRESENT: Mrs B Fordham (Cabinet Member for Education and Skills) and Mr P Webb (Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services)

OFFICERS: Christine McInnes (Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education), David Adams (Interim Deputy Director for Education: Sufficiency, Effectiveness and Skills), Craig Chapman (Interim Deputy Director for Education: Access and Inclusion), Ingrid Crisan (Director for Operational Integrated Children's Services), Kevin Kasaven (Director for Children's Countywide Services), Nicholas Abrahams (Assistant Director Education (West Kent)), Mark Weinel (Head of Service) and Georgia Humphreys (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

Apologies and Substitutes

Apologies had been received from Mr Mallon for whom Mr Finch was present as substitute, Mrs Dean for whom Mr Streatfeild was present as substitute.

Ms Nolan was present virtually.

Declarations of Interest

1. Mr Streatfeild declared that his wife was the Director of Education for SupaJam Colleges.

2. Mr Shonk declared that his wife worked for a taxi firm that transports SEN children to and from school.
3. Mr Reidy declared that he was a Governor at St Simon Stock Catholic School.

Minutes of the meeting held on 12 May 2026

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 12 May 2026 were a correct record.

Verbal Update by Cabinet Members

1. Mrs Fordham, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, gave a verbal update on the following:
 - a. Mrs Fordham advised that work had continued in response to the Government's SEND reform programme and confirmed that Kent's draft local SEND Reform Plan had been submitted to the Department for Education in June 2026. Mrs Fordham explained that the plan had been developed in partnership with education, health and local government partners and reflected a shared commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND. Whilst acknowledging the opportunities, she also highlighted continuing pressures relating to increasing demand, workforce capacity, specialist provision and funding.
 - b. Mrs Fordham outlined a programme of visits undertaken across the county, including visits to vocational and specialist educational settings, primary schools, apprenticeship awards events, youth engagement initiatives and community organisations supporting young people with additional needs.
 - c. Mrs Fordham highlighted examples of collaborative working between mainstream and specialist provision and emphasised the value of engaging directly with children, young people and families to inform future priorities.
 - d. Mrs Fordham also drew attention to recent improvements in Education, Health and Care Plan performance and encouraged Members to continue examining both areas of challenge and areas of improvement.
2. In response to comments and questions it was said:
 - a. Mrs Fordham advised that Members were welcome to engage with her and officers regarding SEND reform developments and future training opportunities.
 - b. Ms McInnes, Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Education, confirmed that Kent's recent Ofsted inspection had

concluded and that feedback had been received. She explained that the findings remained embargoed pending publication of the final report and therefore further information could not yet be provided.

3. Mr Webb, Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services, provided an update on the following:
 - a. Mr Webb provided a verbal update on activity undertaken since his appointment. He outlined visits to a range of children's services, including reception centres for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, family hubs, short break units and children's residential provision.
 - b. Mr Webb highlighted the positive work being undertaken by staff and partners to support vulnerable children and families across the county.
 - c. Mr Webb also referred to the implementation of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 and outlined key provisions relating to family group decision-making, information sharing, safeguarding arrangements and multi-agency child protection teams. He advised that officers were working with partners to prepare for implementation of the new statutory requirements.

RESOLVED that the verbal updates be noted.

Performance Monitoring

1. Mr Kasaven, Director of Children's Countywide Services, introduced the report and invited questions on the Directorate performance scorecard and key performance indicators.
2. In response to comments and questions it was said:
 - a. Mr Kasaven agreed to review the presentation of trend data following a question regarding the reporting of six-month rather than longer-term performance trends.
 - b. Mr Chapman, Interim Deputy Director for Education - Access and Inclusion, advised that performance relating to the timeliness of Education, Health and Care Plans had shown an overall upward trend despite some month-to-month fluctuations. He explained that demand for assessments varied throughout the year and that performance remained heavily influenced by the volume of new requests and the availability of specialist assessment capacity, particularly educational psychologists.
 - c. Mr Chapman reported that previous challenges relating to educational psychology capacity had been addressed through targeted intervention and that underlying systems were now more robust. He advised,

however, that increasing demand following the Government's SEND announcements was likely to continue to place pressure on services.

- d. Mr Adams, Interim Deputy Director - Effectiveness, Sufficiency and Skills, explained that increasing numbers of young people not in education, employment or training reflected a national trend. He outlined work being undertaken through the Pathways for All programme to expand vocational, technical and lower-level post-16 opportunities in partnership with schools, colleges and training providers.
- e. In response to a question regarding attainment indicators, officers clarified that measures relating to the free school meals attainment gap reflected differences in outcomes between cohorts and that a smaller gap represented improved performance.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

26/00042 – Proposed Expansion of Oakwood Park Grammar School

1. Mr Abrahams, Assistant Director of Education (West Kent), introduced the report seeking approval to permanently expand Oakwood Park Grammar School by one form of entry from September 2027. He explained that sustained population growth and housing development within Maidstone had resulted in increasing demand for secondary school places and that forecasts identified a future requirement for additional selective school capacity.
2. Mr Abrahams advised that the proposal formed part of the Council's wider programme of school place planning and would provide the additional grammar school places required to meet anticipated demand within the borough.
3. In response to comments and questions it was said:
 - a. Officers reiterated that the expansion had been identified through long-term forecasting and planning arrangements.

RESOLVED that the Committee considered and endorsed the proposed decision.

26/00043 – Expert at Hands (EaH) and Local Authority SEND Transformation Grant

1. Mr Chapman introduced the proposed decision which sought approval to accept and deploy the Expert at Hands and Local Authority SEND Transformation Grant. He explained that the grant formed part of the

Government's wider SEND reform programme and would support the development of specialist expertise and support for mainstream settings. Members were advised that detailed national guidance had only recently been received and that the requirements of the programme continued to evolve.

2. Mr Chapman advised that the funding would enable the Council and its partners to begin developing the Expert at Hands model, whilst further work was undertaken with schools, families, health partners and other stakeholders to determine how the arrangements would operate in practice. He further explained that acceptance of the grant was linked to broader SEND reform requirements and future arrangements relating to Dedicated Schools Grant deficits.
3. In response to comments and questions it was said:
 - a. Officers confirmed that SEND reform plans had been developed to remain sufficiently adaptable to respond to any future local government reorganisation arrangements.
 - b. A Member raised concerns regarding the delivery of specialist support within rural communities. Officers advised that these concerns had been highlighted to Government and would be considered through future service design.
 - c. Officers acknowledged the challenges associated with recruiting and retaining educational psychologists, speech and language therapists and other specialist practitioners. It was explained that this represented a national issue and that authorities across the country would be competing for a limited workforce.
 - d. A Member discussed the significance of the funding package and the opportunities it presented to improve SEND support whilst recognising ongoing financial and operational pressures within the system.
 - e. Officers advised that extensive stakeholder engagement had already been undertaken in developing Kent's draft SEND Reform Plan and that further opportunities for engagement would continue as reforms progressed.
 - f. In response to questions regarding technology and innovation, officers outlined existing work using technology to support children with communication difficulties and highlighted the continued importance of early intervention and parental engagement.
 - g. Officers explained that the Expert at Hands model was intended to build countywide expertise and shared practice rather than provide direct allocations to individual schools.
 - h. Officers emphasised that SEND reform represented a long-term programme of change and that the current phase focused on building capacity and specialist support within mainstream settings.

RESOLVED that the Committee considered and endorsed the proposed decision.

26/00029 – Implementation of the Families First Partnership Programme

1. Mr Webb introduced the report and outlined the implications of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026. He explained that the legislation introduced significant reforms to safeguarding, family support and children's social care and would require local authorities to implement a new model of multi-agency working focused on prevention and early intervention.
2. Ms Crisan, Director of Operational Integrated Children's Services, advised that the Families First Partnership Programme represented a statutory requirement and that funding had been made available to support implementation. She explained that the Council had already undertaken extensive preparatory work and engagement with partners in anticipation of the reforms.
3. In response to comments and questions it was said:
 - a. Ms Crisan advised that the number of new posts required to support implementation was expected to be relatively small and that recruitment challenges were therefore not anticipated to be significant.
 - b. Officers confirmed that development of the new operating model had already been underway for several months and that staff consultation would commence following approval of the decision. Implementation was expected to take place towards the end of 2026 or early 2027.
 - c. In response to questions regarding safeguarding, officers emphasised that the Council's statutory duties to protect children remained unchanged. Whilst the reforms promoted family-led decision-making wherever appropriate, children would continue to be brought into care where this was necessary to safeguard their welfare.

RESOLVED that the Committee considered and endorsed the proposed decision.

18+ Care Leavers Service

1. Mr Kasaven introduced the report, which had been prepared following the February 2026 Ofsted inspection. He explained that the report outlined current and forecast demand within the 18+ Care Leavers Service, particularly in relation to unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, together with the actions being taken to deliver improvements identified through the Ofsted Action Plan.

2. Members were advised that demand for care leaver services was expected to continue increasing over the coming years and that work was underway to review service arrangements. This included proposals to strengthen earlier engagement with young people prior to adulthood through a revised service model.
3. In response to comments and questions it was said:
 - a. Officers acknowledged the challenges associated with securing suitable accommodation and highlighted the particular pressures arising from the number of children placed in Kent by other local authorities.
 - b. Officers explained that care experienced adults aged over 21 were able to opt out of formal support services, although they continued to be entitled to receive assistance and could re-engage with the service at any time before the age of 25.
 - c. When asked about the support available to unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, officers acknowledged the challenges associated with supporting young people who entered the care system at a later age and highlighted the impact of national policy and funding arrangements. It was confirmed that officers continued to maximise available support and opportunities within existing resources.
 - d. A Member emphasised the importance of supporting young people into education, employment and training and discussed opportunities to strengthen links with employers and accommodation providers. Officers agreed to consider the suggestions raised.
 - e. In response to questions regarding the Families First programme, officers explained that the reforms were intended to provide earlier and more coordinated support for children and families, reducing the need for escalation and ensuring greater continuity of support.
 - f. Members recognised the ongoing challenges facing the service and the importance of continuing progress against the Ofsted improvement plan.

RESOLVED that the Committee noted the forecast future demand for the 18+ Care Leavers Service and the implementation of the Ofsted Improvement Plan.

Work Programme

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.