

**Medway Council**  
**Meeting of Children and Young People Overview and**  
**Scrutiny Committee**

**Thursday, 5 March 2026**

**6.30pm to 9.37pm**

**Record of the meeting**

**Subject to approval as an accurate record at the next meeting of this committee**

**Present:** Councillors: Howcroft-Scott (Chairperson), Mandaracas (Vice-Chairperson), Animashaun, Gilbourne, Gulvin, Hamandishe, Hubbard, Jackson, Joy, Nestorova and Mrs Turpin

**Co-opted Members with voting rights on educational issues only:**

Louise Holden (Roman Catholic Diocese Representative,  
Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark)

**Added members without voting rights:**

Esha Dosanjh, MYC Cabinet Member (Medway Youth Council)  
and Jessica Beer (Teacher Representative)

**Substitutes:**

Councillor:  
Perfect (Substitute for Spring)

Clear (Substitute for Scarrott), Medway Parent and Carers  
Forum

**In Attendance:**

Maria Beaney, Finance Business Partner, Education  
Celia Buxton, Assistant Director, Education and SEND  
Kelly Cogger, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care  
Councillor Tracy Coombs, Portfolio Holder for Education  
Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer  
Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief  
Executive  
Aeilish Geldenhuys, Head of Public Health Programmes  
James Harman, Head of Children's Services Commissioning  
Andy McNally-Johnson, Head of Corporate Accounts  
Councillor Adam Price, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services  
(including statutory responsibility)  
Rebecca Smith, Director of Children and Young People Services  
North Kent Mind

**754 Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Lammas, Lenny Willams (Church of England Diocese Representative), Lisa Scarrot (Medway Parent and Carer Forum) and Councillor Spring.

**755 Record of meeting**

The record of the meeting held on 8 January 2026 was agreed signed as correct.

**756 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances**

There were none.

**757 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping**

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

Councillor Joy declared that he was on the Finance Board of Wayfield Primary school.

Other interests

There were none.

**758 Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services**

**Discussion:**

Councillor Adam Price, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services was in attendance and took questions from the Committee.

Members raised several questions and comments which included:

- The extra funding and support put in place for the Kinship programme was welcomed.
- Maintaining the budget in a demand led service must remain an area of focus.
- The Mocking Bird programme was commended.
- The use of language was instrumental in connecting and building relationships with young people.

**Children's voice** – it was asked how it was ensured that children's voices were heard and were included in shaping services for their future. The Committee

## Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 5 March 2026

was informed that inspectors at the last ILACS visit commented that it was evident that children matter in Medway. Children's voices were central throughout the service, which took all possible opportunities to engage with and consult young people in planning of services. Joint working took place with young people through the Corporate Parenting Board, and we continued to grow our own, which was evident through the appointment of the Assistant Director of Children Social Care who started her journey at Medway, many years ago as a young person and had worked her way up through to leadership position.

**Lived experience** – in response to a question on how it was being ensured that children's lived experiences, hopes and aspirations were being used to shape services, the Portfolio Holder said that the children's choice report taken at the start of each Corporate Parenting Board meeting was central to all discussions. The Corporate Parenting Strategy had been reviewed, with changes made to strengthen the Strategy and further align with aspirations of young people.

**Areas for improvement** - in response to a question on what the response was to Ofsted's comments regarding instability in senior leadership and issues with recruitment and retention of staff, the Portfolio Holder said that the comments made were in relation to inconsistencies in case recording due to high caseloads. The service had responded to the areas highlighted for improvement by working with social workers to ensure consistency in recording, evidencing of tasks and activities and supporting them with personal development. There were ongoing issues experienced nationally with recruitment and retention and through various initiatives, the service had been able to recruit more permanent staff to the service. Lessons continued to be learnt on areas of improvement and responded to accordingly. There was a focus on a strong induction programme, and exit interviews conducted had been instrumental in gaining meaningful insight on the reasons staff left Medway. Cultural changes continued to occur across the service, with feedback received that the senior leadership team were a particular strength of Medway Council.

It was further asked how the service would ensure consistency of practice across all teams and ensure the sustainability of progress made in improvement. The Committee was informed that there were seven practice development leads in place across the service and a Principal Social Worker who maintained quality assurance of practice. Monthly audits took place to identify strengths and areas of focus, with training programmes in place that were aligned to practice improvement in an environment of high support and high challenge to staff.

**Virtual schools** – it was commented that there had been progress made in virtual schools, with personalisation programmes, and it was asked how it would be ensured that the progress made was sustained and led to positive outcomes. The Committee was informed that the relationship and communication between practitioners continued to improve, with a clear strong commitment to ensure good outcomes for young people to enable them to

## Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 5 March 2026

succeed. Foster carers were also instrumental in assisting young people to access education. In response to feedback on a need to strengthen the work of the Corporate Parenting Sub-Group, the membership and terms of reference had been reviewed, and the group was now chaired by the Assistant Director of Education to drive forward consistency in progressing actions.

**Foster carers** – it was commented that the increase in the recruitment of foster carers was encouraging, and it was asked what was being done to retain them. The Portfolio Holder said that being a foster carer was a calling, was rewarding and this required commitment and a special desire and dedication. At the celebratory event, it was encouraging to meet with people that had been caring for young people for many years. In response to providing additional support for foster carers, there were now three Mocking Bird networks in place across Medway which had been instrumental to foster carers in building strong connections of support, and social workers also built strong relationships with carers. Feedback received was that carers liked working for Medway. The service was committed to continue to explore ways to retain their foster carers.

**Inclusion** - in response to a question regarding what the next steps would be to build on the success of inclusion for children with high and complex needs, the Committee was informed that three inclusion conferences had taken place which were increasingly attended by a growing number of schools. Medway schools were becoming more inclusive and more children with complex needs were now attending schools in Medway and not outside of the authority.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the report.

## **759 Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Education**

### **Discussion:**

Councillor Tracy Coombs, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services was in attendance and took questions from the Committee.

Members raised several questions and comments which included:

The summary produced by the Medway Parents and Carers forum on the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reforms was recommended to all to access as it outlined the changes clearly and concisely.

**Access to SEND provision** - it was asked how parents were being educated on how they could access SEND support in order to alleviate the anxieties around capability of mainstreams schools being able to support their children. The Portfolio Holder said that there were changes being planned for SEND support in order to improve and streamline the system and access to services. The SEND reforms white paper aspirations were for families to receive early support without the need for Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) and formal diagnosis, improve training of staff in schools through national SEND training

## Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 5 March 2026

and ensure that school environments were more inclusive. Work on the reforms was already underway, with the department and partners identifying areas for improvement. Schools continued to work together to meet the needs of children, with 21 schools involved in the Partnership in Neurodiversity(PINs) programme and a further 14 schools due to come on board.

**Inclusion rates** - it was commented that whilst the drive for inclusion was welcomed, it was important to be mindful that mainstream education was not appropriate for some children with complex needs and that parent and carers views must continue to be sought on appropriateness. The Committee was informed that children's needs were assessed on an individual basis, with parental wishes being accommodated where appropriate. Children with very complex needs would continue to attend specialist provisions. Medway continued to work extensively to increase local capacity of provision and the two new schools would provide that local provision. Mainstream schools would receive strong support on how to provide and care for children with SEND.

**Elective Home Education (EHE)** - it was asked how parental confidence was being strengthened to prevent further increases in EHE numbers. The Portfolio Holder said that it was vital to continue to address the drivers behind parental decision to EHE. A pilot study was conducted which revealed that the main reason for EHE was dissatisfaction with schools and lack of confidence in their abilities to meet children's needs. There was work to be undertaken on reassuring parents and carers, working with schools to assist with mediation and improve their communication and engagement with parents. The education department was being grown to enable increased support for families and check that the education being received by young people was appropriate. At present, the local authority had very few levers due to parental choice and the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill would provide the local authority with more statutory responsibilities. This meant that there would be instances where parents would have to ask permission to EHE, in cases where children have an EHCP in order to ensure that those children remain safeguarded. A Member further commented that families received extensive SEN support in primary phase, with less in secondary phase and post 16. The justice system had a high percentage people with SEND. There was also a need for more support and preparedness for transition to adulthood, The Portfolio Holder welcomed the helpful comments and agreed to look into preparedness and transitions into adulthood for young people.

**SEND reform challenges** - it was asked what the Portfolio Holder's response to the SEND reforms were and what challenges she anticipated as concerns had been expressed to the Local Government Association on the capacity of local authorities to deliver the expected changes at pace. The Portfolio Holder said that the transition period would involve a great deal of planning and work was being undertaken with partners on identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses. Partners were used to working collaboratively together and were aware of their individual responsibilities. The SEND reforms would be worked on alongside the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to minimise duplication of work. One of the challenges identified was in resourcing and as a result, plans were already in place to increase staffing in services.

**EHP** - it was asked whether the resources put in place to clear the backlog of EHCPs were successful and if ongoing assessments met the legal timeframe of 20 weeks. The Committee was informed that all the backlog was cleared, and there was enough investment put into the service to maintain current assessments. There was a peak period where the service received over 100 EHCP requests every month and whilst resources were put in place to manage. The demand kept increasing as a result of the knock on effect of the announcement of the SEND reforms. The demand had now started to reduce, and it was expected that officers would be able to maintain legal timeframes as time progressed.

It was further asked what was being done to address the academic gap of underperformance in children with EHCPs. The Committee was informed that whilst performance was below national, the gap was narrowing. Conversations continued to take place with school governors who were tasked with holding to account schools under their Trusts. There was support through the Department for Education for schools with very low attainments results, but many schools relied on their Trusts for support. Regular meetings took place with CEO's of Trusts and education partners. There were however constraints within the academies systems, but officers do raise concerns and offer support to schools.

**Highlights** - in response to a question on what her personal highlights of the last year were, the Portfolio Holder said that there had been many, such as the clearance of the backlog of EHCPs and working on reduction of wait times for assessments. Working with schools in partnership and system leadership which she added led to significant reduction in suspensions and exclusions. Completion of the safety valve and addressing the deficit and Increased SEND provision from 23% to 46% in mainstream schools. Looking forward, there would be work undertaken to improve early years provision, and increased opportunities and training for Post 16. The two new specialist schools that were due to open in the next few years was also a major highlight of the extensive work by senior leadership.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the report.

## **760 Children and Young People's Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing**

### **Discussion:**

Officers from North Kent Mind gave a presentation on the Medway Therapeutic Alliance, what is encompassed, the offer for young people and priority groups within that cohort, as well and continuous improvement and governance of the Alliance.

Members then raised several questions and comments:

## Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 5 March 2026

It was commented that this service would be a safety net for young people to ensure that they did not fall through the gap. However, there was a concern that whilst this service was in place for children up to their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday or age 25 for care leavers or children with SEND, that people would not be suddenly dropped upon turning 19 or 26. The Officer agreed that it was vital to ensure continuity of service for young people and whilst there were age boundaries within services, they were conscious of ensuring discussions took place at early stage of intervention regarding long term needs, goals and where appropriate, transition. The priority was on changing the narrative to ensure that young people did not wait till they reached crisis point before reaching out for support.

**Promotion and access to support** - it was asked how the work of the Alliance was being promoted and what would happen if they were unable to support a young person. The Committee was informed that roadshows continued to take place across Medway and in schools, there were online webinars available and North Kent Mind would work with the Medway Youth Council to promote the service. There were other services that young people could access if the Therapeutic Alliance was not the right service, and there were many online resources that young people could be signposted to. The Therapeutic Alliance would promote a “no wrong door” approach and if their service wasn’t right they would support the young person to access the right support.

**Continuity and accountability** - it was asked what assurance could be given on leadership amidst concerns that expectations may not be delivered. Officers said that the Alliance was developed to enable access to services before the need for specialist intervention, which would reduce pressure on specialist services. Over the years, different services had been commissioned across many areas, and this had begun to create confusion for parents, carers and families. The Therapeutic Alliance operated on a commissioned lead provider model, in this case North Kent Mind (NKM) as the lead and they subcontracted out to other providers to deliver the services required. NKM would be responsible for holding their subcontractors to account and maintaining service level agreements.

It was further commented that it was crucial to develop cohesion by ensuring that data across all services under the Alliance were uniform in order to be able to hold providers to account. The officer agreed that this was crucial and that there would be several mechanisms of accountability put in place, including measures of engagement and outcomes.

### **Decision:**

- a) The Committee noted that North Kent Mind (NKM) had been successfully awarded the contract for the Medway Therapeutic Alliance Service.
- b) The Committee noted the mobilisation strategy for the launch of the Medway Therapeutic Alliance, on 01 April 2026.

**761 The One Medway Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report and Strategic Risk Summary - Quarter 3 2025/26**

**Discussion:**

The Committee received the report and were informed that there were some measures that remained below target, with improvements noted in areas with long term targets. It was anticipated that the children's social care reforms would positively influence performance.

**Measures on a downward trend** – in response to a question on what was being done to address the downward long term trend of some measures, the Committee was informed that children's social care had ambitious targets set which they were working towards achieving. The service worked with partnership leads on understanding trends, and reporting in areas such as Early Help, which was a difficult target to report on, as different systems had been used to try to capture the data required. There was work being undertaken as part of the sufficiency strategy, which was currently being reviewed, and there was ongoing recruitment of more foster carers which would enable children to be placed locally.

**Reduction in Statutory Interventions** – it was asked what monitoring of reduction of statutory interventions took place due to a shift in demand in Early Help. The Committee was informed that there had been a shift in terms of families moving over to family solutions but there was more to be done to increase the numbers further. There was additional work being undertaken with partners on Family First and the children's social care reforms would assist with the work being undertaken in Early Help. Extensive work continued to be undertaken to support moving families down from Child Protection where appropriate. Additional resource had been put into the service to ensure that there was enough capacity in place to support work on direction of travel and achievement of targets.

**Decision:**

The Committee noted the Quarter 3 2025/26 progress of the performance indicators used to monitor progress of the Council's priorities, and the Strategic Risk Summary, as set out in the report.

**762 Capital Budget Monitoring - Round 3 2025/26**

**Discussion:**

The Committee received the Capital Budget Monitoring Round 3 2025/26 report which was presented to Cabinet on 10 February 2026. The Capital schemes within the remit of this Committee were projected to overspend by £177,000 (£57,000 underspend as at Round 2) against the approved budget of £73.622million.

## Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 5 March 2026

It was asked what the implications of the transfer of earmarked reserves to the general fund, and what the reason was for round 3 variance for interest and financing. The Committee was informed that an extensive review of earmarked reserves had taken place as it had been realised over time and events had changed since the reserves had initially been set up, some were no longer needed, and it was more beneficial to be used now. There were however other earmarked reserves still in place. In relation to interest on financing, the budget was built based upon predictions by treasury advisers on the likely interest rates that would be incurred for borrowing requirements, who indicated that interest rates would fall quicker than had happened during the financial year.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the results of the third round of capital budget monitoring for 2025/26.

## **763 Revenue Budget Monitoring - Round 3 2025/26**

### **Discussion:**

The Committee received the Capital Budget Monitoring Round 3 2025/26 report which was presented to Cabinet on 10 February 2026. Education was forecasting an overspend of £434,000 which was an improvement of £525,000 from round 2. Children's Services was forecasting an overspend of £2.750million, which was an increase of £343,000 from the round 2 forecast.

**Overspend in children's services** – it was asked how confident officers were that children's services would reduce the overspend, in particular in client support packages of £2.4million and that the reduction in the overall budget of £4.6million next year would be achieved. The Committee was informed that the placement support package alleviated foster care placement costs and the increased spend in that area had brought down the overall spend in placements, The service continued to work diligently with finance to bring down overspend and worked to reduce overall packages where appropriate. There was confidence in provision of the right support for children in receipt of support packages, whether at home with carers or in kinship arrangements by providing additional support to prevent children coming into care where possible.

The Finance Business Partner added that there was confidence at this time due to mapping of current situation and expectations in subsequent years, that the assumptions made on reduction of the budget for the upcoming year was as accurate as possible based on current data, however small variations could occur at any time and could lead to higher spend.

**Overspend in Education and SEND** - there was concern regarding the £1.5million overspend in inclusion which would bring spend to £5.3million and due to the increase in demand for EHCP, there was concern raised regarding the allocation of £4.6million overall budget for the service in 2026/27. The Committee was informed that the £1.5million overspend was a result of agency staff brought in to address backlog and issues with EHCP assessments. This

## Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 5 March 2026

had been included in next year's budget, with a view to recruit more permanent staff, notwithstanding any changes that needed to be made as a result of reforms. There had also been significant savings realised in the transport budget.

**SEND service** - in response to a question on how confident the service was in meeting budget requirements for SEND children despite the impact on services, the Committee was informed that officers were as confident as possible in terms of delivery and current support in place, notwithstanding changes that would come with the new reforms and how the service would be redeveloped. There had been announcements of grants to fund the reforms, which the Council would have to bid for and what this could mean for Medway would have to be factored in as more information came through.

**Sustainability** – in response to a question on fluctuations in long term planning and mitigating reliance on capital receipts, the Committee was informed that the finance team worked alongside services to update forecasts on a regular basis. Forecasts were made with 99% live tracking data and all peaks and troughs were monitored. The Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive added that the senior leadership team consistently recognised pressures and mitigated.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the results of the third round of revenue budget monitoring for 2025/26, in particular the risk to interest and financing projections, the Committee noted that Cabinet have instructed CMT to implement urgent actions to bring expenditure back within the budget agreed by Full Council.

## **764 Work programme**

### **Discussion:**

The work programme was presented for information.

A Member referenced the latest Ofsted inspection of Wayfield Primary school.

Councillor Joy declared that he was on the finance board for the school and removed himself from the meeting during this discussion. It was agreed that the Chairperson would discuss concerns regarding the performance of the school with the Assistant Director of Education outside of this meeting.

Councillor Joy returned to the meeting after discussions relating to Wayfield Primary School.

In response to a suggestion that the Integrated Care Board (ICB) attend a future meeting to be held to account on their performance in relation to various services for children and young people, the Public Health Principal and Strategic Head of Public Health Programmes confirmed that discussions had

## **Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 5 March 2026**

been taking place with officers from the ICB on attendance at a future meeting and that they could be invited to discuss performance of initial health assessments once their restructure and reorganisation had been finalised.

### **Decision:**

- a) The Committee noted the report, agreed the work programme as set out at Appendix 1 to the report, and accepted the proposed changes, outlined in italic text on Appendix 1.
- b) The Committee agreed that an item be added to the work programme for a report from the Integrated Care Board on progress on Initial Health Assessments.

### **Chairperson**

**Date:**

**Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer**

Telephone: 01634 332104

Email: [democratic.services@medway.gov.uk](mailto:democratic.services@medway.gov.uk)