Cabinet
11 November 2025
Children's Services Capital Programme
For Decision

Cabinet Member:
Cllr C Sutton, Children's Services, Education & Skills
Cllr S Clifford, Finance & Capital Strategy

Local Councillor(s): All

Senior Leadership Team:
P Dempsey, Executive Director of People - Children

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Statutory Authority:

Report status: Part Exempt Para 3

Executive summary

1. Children's Services are responsible for commissioning several large Capital programmes within the Council's overall Capital programme. Some of those programmes have delegations attached to them enabling named officers to approve individual projects within those programmes, including projects which are above the key threshold decision level. Others relied upon delegations or a Scheme of Nomination which sat outside Children's Services, which is no longer valid.

1.1 Through these capital programmes the Council has been able to ensure there are sufficient mainstream school places available within the school estate to meet overall demand by increasing capacity where it has been required and addressed a number of suitability issues in schools to allow them to operate more effectively.

1.2 In relation to children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) the capital investment has also provided 323 additional places within our Special School and Alternative Provision settings, with more in the pipeline, and 108 places in Inclusion Hubs and Resource Bases in 9 mainstream schools, again with more proposed to be developed under the SEND capital programme.

1.3 The new Family Hub provision has been created through investment in existing properties, with more projects to be completed, enabling more children and families to benefit from locality based multi-disciplinary help and support.

1.4 As additional external funding has been added to programme budgets, additional projects are being added to programmes to meet identified need or priorities. However, the delegations currently in place need to be reviewed to ensure they remain up to date and cover the extent of the projects within the programmes as set out in Appendix 1.

1.5 Appendix 1 sets out those projects which have already been completed or are underway under the existing delegations, together with those future and additional projects which are intended to be progressed under the relevant funding programme.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1 Cabinet approves the budget and funding allocations to projects within Appendix A (current Capital Programme) and delegates authority to the Executive Director of People – Children's, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education & Skills and the Corporate Director Finance & Commercial/Chief Financial Officer & S151 Officer to agree funding allocation of up to £500,000 for any new project, provided those allocations are within the overall Capital Programme budget.

2.2 Cabinet delegates authority to the Executive Director of Place, in consultation with the Executive Director of People – Children's and Cabinet Members for Children's Services, Education and Skills and for Property and Assets and Economic Growth and the Corporate Director Finance & Commercial/Chief Financial Officer & S151 Officer to procure and award contracts, or release agreed funding to third parties delivering projects, for any project within Cabinet approved Appendix A provided the project cost is contained within the overall programme budget.

3. Reason for the recommendation(s)

3.1 To draw together several previous delegations against individual Capital programme budgets to ensure consistency across programmes and to ensure appropriate oversight and authority is in place to allow projects to progress through from inception to delivery.

4. **Background**

4.1 In 2003 Dorset County Council started its programme to re-build or refurbish all Community, Voluntary Controlled and Foundation schools in its Estate and established the Modernising Schools Programme (MSP), which was over seen by the MSP Board. The overarching aim of the MSP was to improve pupil achievement through the provision of better learning environments.

4.2 At that time Cabinet approved the funding for the programme and delegated authority to the Director of Children's Services in consultation with the MSP Board to monitor the programme and approve funding allocations and budgets for individual projects.

4.3 The delegation to support the MSP Programme was amended over the proceeding years to reflect changes in the focus of the programme and changing funding streams, including 'Basic Need' and the provision of early SEND projects. By January 2018 the name of the Board was changed to School Organisation, Capital Programme and Admissions Board (SOCA), which is the programme title currently shown in the Council's Capital programme. However, as the SOCA Board no longer exists the Programme title could be misleading, so it is proposed to change the programme title within the Capital Programme back to the Modernising School Programme (MSP).

4.4 Since the formation of Dorset Council in 2019 the SOCA Board was disbanded, and several of the reporting process were changed. However, the programme has continued to operate to improve the school estate and to meet the Council's statutory obligations to meet the requirement for sufficient school places. Appendix 1 (Previously approved SOCA Programme Projects since April 2023) shows those projects which have already been approved under the current delegation process since April 2023 and those projects which are committed to (Committed SOCA Programme), but which will need final approval once detailed costs are known.

4.5 In September 2022 the SEND Capital Strategy Implementation Plan was agreed by Cabinet to enable the delivery of increased SEND specialist provision across the County. This was to support the mitigation of the deficit on the High Needs Block and support more children being educated locally in their communities. Delegated authority was granted to the Executive Director for Place, in consultation with the Executive Director for People – Children's to enter into construction contracts at the appropriate time for projects which were referred to in that report, provided the project was within the budget level set by the Cabinet paper. For clarity those projects which were referred to within the September 2022 Cabinet report, and to which that delegation applies are also indicated on Appendix 1 (SEND Capital Programme Projects covered by September 2022 delegation – Project Status update).

4.6 Additional external funding has been allocated to the SEND Capital Programme since 2022. Similarly, additional funding has also been added to the SOCA budget through DfE funding allocations and so officers have continued to formulate programmes of work to utilise that funding to support the objectives of both the SEND and SOCA programmes.

4.7 In light of the recent SWAP Audit, officers have undertaken a review of decisions made based on the September 2022 delegation and have identified 5 projects within the SEND Capital Programme that have been approved by the SEND Programme Delivery Group, but which were not explicitly covered by the previous delegation. These projects do form part of the programme subsequently agreed by the SEND Delivery Group, (an officer group now chaired by the Corporate Director for Education & Learning), and the individual project budgets are contained within the overall programme budget. Processes have now been tightened so this should not happen again. The progression of these projects has not created any financial issues within the programme budget and has created over 50 SEND support places in new Inclusion Hubs/Resources Bases. For completeness these projects are included within the list of SEND Capital Programme (additional projects) shown on Appendix 1.

4.8 The Family Hub Programme, which has been developing since 2021, also contains several capital projects which may be above the key decision threshold when detailed project costs are known and projects need to move into the construction phase. It would seem relevant to extend any agreed delegations as set out in this paper to include that programme as well. These projects are also indicated on Appendix 1 under the Family Hub Programme.

4.9 Similarly, there is a project within the capital programme related to increasing the Children's Residential Sufficiency provision with regard to Short Breaks provision, which was referred to in a paper to Cabinet on 19 January 2021. Whilst this project was not specifically referred to in that cabinet paper, it does have a project budget in the agreed capital programme above the key decision threshold level. This project is shown in Appendix 1 under Children's Residential Sufficiency and is currently in the design process. Once that is completed it will be tendered and provided it is within budget 'commit to construct' approval would be sought. As this is similar to the other programmes, albeit at present only one project, it would seem relevant to extend any agreed delegations as set out in this paper to include this project as well.

4.10 A future SEND and Education Capital Strategy is being developed in line with policy and practice developments and will be presented to Cabinet in due course.

5. Alternative options considered

5.1 The alternative option would be for all projects above the key threshold decision level to be brought to Cabinet on an individual basis for approval for inclusion in a programme and to ‘commit to construct’. This could create a piecemeal approach to approval of programmes, possibly delay progression of individual projects and incur additional cost (project costs may increase while waiting for approval).

6. Legal considerations

6.1 Appropriate decision and procurement routes will be followed for all projects within these programmes.

7. Financial implications

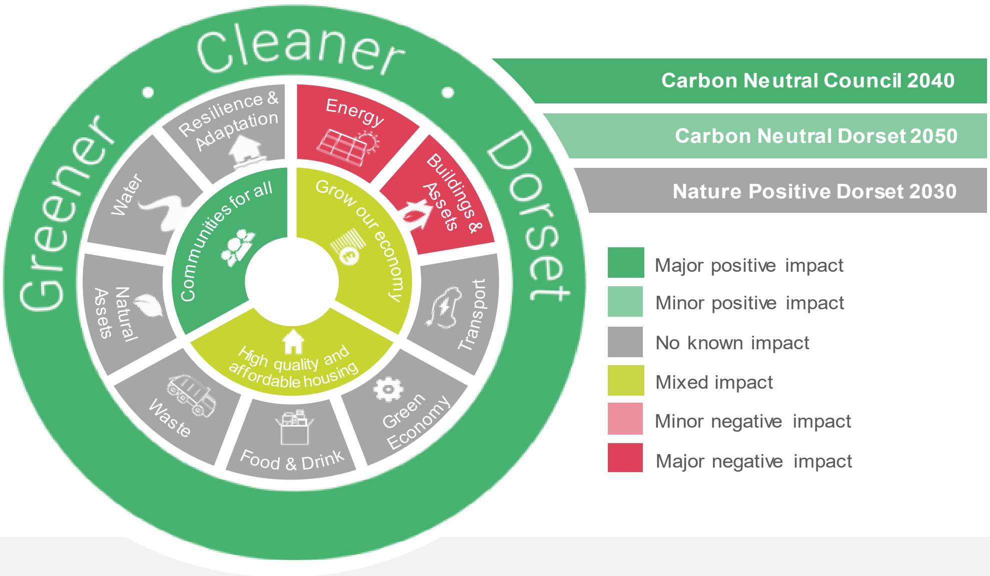
7.1 There are no financial implications generated by this report. All Children’s Services capital programmes referred to within this report are already within the Council’s existing approved capital programme and monitored by the Capital Strategy Asset Management Group. This report does not propose any change to the process for building or approval of the Council’s existing capital programme. The report proposes to update and clarify decisions that may be taken by officers to confirm Children’s Services capital programme funding for individual projects and approve individual projects for inclusion in one of the capital programmes as well as for procurement and construction.

8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

8.1 The Dorset Council Natural Environment, Climate and Ecological decision wheel is a tool used to identify the climate and ecological implications of the programmes.

8.2 The results of using the tool in consideration of approving this paper are presented below: -

Children's Services Capital Programme



Quantitative Impact on CEE targets (if known)		
	Unit	Number of units (+/-)
2030 - Natural asset extent & condition	Ha	0
2040 - Operational Emissions	CO_2 (tonnes)	

Whilst the results show two major negative impact, this is due to the generic nature of this paper and is not project specific. All building projects contained within these programmes will be designed to carefully consider environmental impact, although mitigation measures may be limited as projects progress as they will involve refurbishment of existing buildings.

9. Well-being and health implications

9.1 All Well-being and health implications will be reviewed within the individual programmes and projects.

10. Other implications

10.1 None

11. Risk implications

11.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: High

Residual Risk: Low

11.2 Funding is in place to support these capital programmes, however, the delegations which currently support them need to be updated to reflect additional projects which have been added to programmes due to additional external funding being available.

12. Equalities

12.1 Progression of projects contained within the Children’s Capital programmes will continue to improve the outcomes for children in schools, increase the number of SEND places available to Dorset pupils and support children and families in the community.

13. Appendices

13.1 Appendix A – Current Capital programmes and included projects (Exempt).

13.2 Appendix B - Climate Emergency Wheel supporting tables.

14. Background papers

People and Health Overview Committee – 31 January 2023 Family Hubs
Dorset Council Cabinet – 6 September 2022 SEND Capital Strategy implementation Plan
Dorset Council Cabinet – 19 January 2021 Children’s Provision
Dorset County Council Cabinet – 4 April 2018 Sufficiency of SEND Provision Capital Requirements
Dorset County Council Cabinet – Cabinet 19 March 2014 Quarterly Asset Management Update

15 Report sign-off

15.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)