

PEOPLE AND HEALTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 21 JANUARY 2026

Present: Cllrs Toni Coombs (Chair), Jane Somper (Vice-Chair), Sally Holland, Carole Jones, Chris Kippax, Robin Legg, Andy Todd and Carl Woode

Present remotely: Cllr Barry Goringe

Apologies: Cllr Bridget Bolwell

Also present: Cllr Shane Bartlett, Cllr Simon Clifford, Cllr Ryan Hope, Cllr Nick Ireland, Cllr Steve Murcer, Cllr Steve Robinson, Cllr Clare Sutton and Cllr Gill Taylor

Officers present (for all or part of the meeting):

Sean Cremer (Corporate Director for Finance and Commercial), Liz Crocker (Head of Strategy), Sam Crowe (Director of Public Health), George Dare (Senior Democratic and Governance Officer), Paul Dempsey (Executive Director of People - Children), Marc Eyre (Service Manager for Assurance), Paula Golding (Corporate Director for Care and Protection), Chris Heighway (Performance and Analytics Team Manager), Julia Ingram (Corporate Director for Adult Social Care Operations), Sam Poole (Interim Corporate Director for Commissioning & Improvement), Jonathan Price (Executive Director of People - Adults and Housing), Amy-Jane White (Quality Assurance and Programme Lead), Sharon Attwater (Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Performance) and Lee House (Service Manager for Finance)

Officers present remotely (for all or part of the meeting):

47. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Bridget Bolwell.

48. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Todd declared that his daughter had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

49. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 November 2024 were confirmed and signed.

50. Public Participation

There was no public participation.

51. Councillor Questions

There were no questions from councillors.

52. Urgent Items

There were no urgent items.

53. 2025/26 Quarter 2 Performance Report

The Strategic Performance and Risk Manager introduced the quarterly performance report and invited the Executive Director of Children's Services to outline the narrative for the performance indicators.

The committee discussed the Children's performance indicators, and the following matters were raised during the discussion:

- A member sought assurance on whether delays to EHCP's would improve following implementation of the new case management system. The Executive Director of Children's Services explained that delays were not just caused by the implementation of the new system, and that AI can help with improvements and robustness.
- A new locality model was launching in April, and it would centralise the EHCP capacity. The use of AI was aiming to be launched within 6 months, however this needed to be done in a sensible way.
- It was confirmed there were no children in care in unregistered provision.
- The national data for SEND tribunals against local authorities was 98% of tribunals were lost by the local authority. In the last quarter, the council had won 3 tribunals which was considered a success.
- Children's services were working closely with the government and Department for Education, who wanted the council to continue to perform well in the Families First pathfinder and to roll it out nationally. Therefore, the Executive Director was confident that government support for the pathfinder would continue.

A written response would be provided to address a question from Cllr Kippax regarding an app that was being used.

The Committee noted the Quarter 2 Performance report.

54. Medium Term Financial Plan and Budget Strategy report

The Corporate Director for Finance and Commercial (Section 151 Officer) introduced the Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP). The proposed net revenue budget for 2026/27 was £482.6m. The underlying cost pressure was approximately £37m, the pressures in the proposed budget were addressed

through a range of efficiencies, savings, grants and income. The proposed budget presented a balanced budget to the council.

The Committee discussed the report and asked questions of the Section 151 Officer, Cabinet Members, and relevant directors. Non-committee members were also given the opportunity to ask questions. Each of the appendices relevant to the committee's remit were discussed in-turn, following an introduction from the senior officer responsible for the service.

Appendix 1d – Adults and Housing

The demand in adult social care was predicted to continue rising, although it was not expected to increase above the growth included in the budget. Pressures on the wider system could create pressure on the budget. Savings were to be achieved during the year.

The following points were raised during discussion on the Adults and Housing budget:

- Whether the FutureCare savings target was realistic. The Executive Director for Adults and Housing was very confident for that these savings would be made.
- A 3% vacancy factor was expected to be built into the budget. Recruitment for social workers was a challenge but vacancies for these posts were not deliberately held.
- The unfunded staffing posts pressure in housing were being extended into this financial year as they were on a 2-year basis but were needed to continue investment and transformation in housing.
- With regards to the council's transport offer and making savings, the Executive Director advised the council was looking at more cost-efficient ways of funding this, such as using more direct payments.

Appendix 1e – Children's Services

There was a 5.7% increase in the Children's Services budget with £3.5m of pressures from pay increases and inflation. The largest pressure was the children in care placement budget. The budget included a £1.5m investment into fostering and kinship care, which was the least expensive option for children in care.

The following points were raised during the Children's Services budget discussion:

- There was a concern from the committee about the council's High Needs Block deficit. The Section 151 Officer advised this was a national issue and the government planned to introduce a SEND white paper which would set out policy reform options. The council was managing SEND well and there may be additional funding in the final settlement.
- A specific timeline was not attached to the introduction of AI. Additional capacity from remodelling the service, along with using AI to support staff, would mean the council does not need to rely on agency staff. The

Transformation Management Office were reviewing the options for the implementation of AI.

Appendix 1f – Birth to Settled Adulthood

There had been significant growth in the budget for Birth to Settled Adulthood to reflect the service need. The service should help prevent growth in need and supporting children to stay with families. Some cost avoidance has been achieved through accommodation for young adults.

The following points were raised during the discussion:

- The Dorset Parent Carer Council was praised for their involvement in developing the Birth to Settled Adulthood service.
- There was concern about the increasing demand and overspend for the service and £1 million savings had not been achieved. The Corporate Director for Adult Care Operations advised that financial benefits from Birth to Settled Adulthood would take time and would develop as a person matures into adulthood. There was evidence that the approach was making a difference, and this was recognised by the Dorset Parent Carer Council.
- Birth to Settled Adulthood has helped Adult Social Care to forecast their future demand. However, there were targets in the health system to reduce spending which could have impacts on social care budgets and performance in the future.

Appendix 1h – Public Health and Prevention

There were no questions or discussion following an introduction by the Director of Public Health and Prevention.

It was noted earlier in the meeting that there was a small uplift in the ringfenced Public Health grant and that some other funding streams had been consolidated into this grant. Some pressures had emerged following the transfer of some services from the Place directorate; however, the Director was confident that the service could remain within budget.

At the end of the discussion, the Chairman summed up and reinforced the need for clear contingencies within the budget, with pressures caused by increasing demand and unachieved savings.

The Committee made the following recommendation to Cabinet:

Recommendation: That Cabinet clarifies what contingency and resilience exists in the proposed 2026/27 budget should pressures exceed assumptions.

55. Corporate Complaints Team Annual Report 2024-25

The Service Manager for Assurance introduced the Corporate Complaints Team Annual Report. The key messages raised in the report included a 17% increase in complaints, greater use of AI in complaints, and improved processes where a complaint is sent to an MP or the Chief Executive.

Members discussed the report and asked questions of the officers. The following points were raised:

- The complaints team tracks learning from complaints, which was set out in the appendix to the report. There can be less complaints after lessons learnt, however some services can continue to have complaints, such as SEND due to a lack of specialist school places.
- The complaints team can use AI to summarise complaints.
- Complaints in Children's and Adults social care were prioritised due to the impact it could have on their lives.
- Poor communication was a theme in this and previous year's complaints reports. This could be caused due to complainants sending multiple emails a day and expecting quick responses. Children's Services recognised that communications issues have not been solved, but staff capacity was being increased which would give staff more time to respond to communication.
- There are regular complaints meetings with directorates to review complaints and issues arising from them. Direct conversations with the complaints team take place when an individual complaint needs to be resolved.
- Complaints about providers go through the usual complaints process as the council commissions the providers. These complaints could come in through a number of routes, such as safeguarding referrals.
- Seeing learning from complaints embedded in services and considering how communication can be improved would be a positive next step for improvement.

The Committee noted the Annual Complaints Report for 2024/25.

56. Committee's Work Programme and Cabinet's Forward Plan

The work programme would be updated to schedule timelines for the current unscheduled items, and these items would be added to future meetings following the approval of the Calendar of Meetings.

The following items were to be added to the work programme:

- CQC Inspection report and action plan
- EHCP Working Group final report and recommendations

57. Exempt Business

There was no exempt business.

Duration of meeting: 2.00 - 4.46 pm

Chairman

.....