

CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMMITTEE

MINUTES AND DECISION RECORD

2 December 2025

The meeting commenced at 4.00 pm in the Civic Centre, Hartlepool

Present:

Councillor: Melanie Morley (In the Chair)

Councillors: Moss Boddy, Bob Buchan, Martin Dunbar and Sue Little

Co-opted members:

Joanne Wilson, RC Diocesan Representative

School Heads representatives:

Sue Sharpe, Primary Schools Head Representative

Zoe Westley, Special Schools Head Representative

Parent Governor representative:

Martin Pout

Officers: Alison Sutherland, Director of Children's and Joint Commissioning Services

James Magog, Director of Finance, IT and Digital

Laura Gough, Assistant Director (Children and Families)

Rebecca Stephenson, Assistant Director (Early Intervention, Performance and Commissioning)

Amanda Whitehead, Assistant Director, Education

Micky Froud, Sendiass Manager

Fiona Stobbs, Senior Advisor (Inclusive Learning and SEND)

Jane Watt, Group Accountant

Julian Heward, Senior Public Relations Officer

Jo Stubbs, Principal Democratic Services and Legal Support Officer

28. Apologies for Absence

Councillor Phil Holbrook

29. Declarations of Interest

None

30. Minutes of the meeting held on 11th November 2025

Received.

31. Medium Term Financial Plan (MTPF) 2026/27 to 2029/30 *(Director of Finance, IT and Digital and Executive Director of Children's Services)*

Type of decision

Budget and Policy Framework

Purpose of report

To provide an update on the MTFP and enable the Committee to scrutinise and comment on the savings proposals referred from the Finance and Corporate Affairs Committee

Issue(s) for consideration

The Director of Finance, IT and Digital presented the report which reiterated that all councils across the country were facing significant financial challenges owing to the impact of inflation and demand on services along with historic inadequate increases in government funding to meet these challenges. As outlined at Finance and Corporate Affairs Committee in November, the Council had a forecast budget deficit of £8.572m for 2026/27 and £20.591m over the full MTFP period. It was noted that the main driver of this deficit was acute financial pressures within children's social care.

As in previous years, addressing the deficit needed to be managed through budget saving actions which sought to minimise the impact on services where possible and limited use of reserves. With regard to savings, proposals totalling £4.117m had been given for 2026/27. Pending publication of the local government finance settlement in late December, the acceptance of the proposals for 2026/27 would leave a remaining budget gap of £4.300m. This would mean the budget could not be signed off as robust without the significant increased Government funding, further significant budget cuts or savings and/or an increase in Council Tax for 2026/27. It was also noted that these figures were based on spending on children's social care remaining static.

Details of the individual savings were provided in Appendix B. £3.000m savings had been identified through the implementation of a comprehensive strategy aimed at reducing the number of children entering in care, while enabling those in care to return to their families as soon as is safe to do so. Several key initiatives were being progressed and the most costly placements would be reviewed and alternatives explored where possible.

Elected Members discussed the savings proposal. They were pleased with the proposals to reform the system both in terms of savings that might be achieved but also in terms of better outcomes for those children and young people in the care system. The Chair highlighted that this was not just a task for the Children's Services team and would involve parents, schools, outside agencies and the wider community. She urged everyone to get involved and share any ideas on how savings and improvements could be made.

Decision

The savings proposals detailed in Appendix B relating to the services within this Committee portfolio were approved to be reported back to Finance and Corporate Affairs Committee on 19 January 2026.

32. Special School Growth Proposals Academic Year 2025-26 *(Executive Director of Children's Services and Director of Finance, IT and Digital)*

Type of decision

Key

Purpose of report

To outline growth proposals from Springwell and Catcote Special Schools. These were outside of the 3% funding increase agreed at the 18 March 2025 Committee.

Issue(s) for consideration

In March 2025 as part of the High Needs Block budget setting process for 2025/26 Members had approved a £5 inflationary increase to special school funding for 2025/26. Since then each school had produced an updated cost model based on pupil admissions and expected budgets.

Springwell School had made a total growth request of £0.179m. This would cover increases from the net cost of pay changes, loss of income from out of Hartlepool placement and make a revenue contribution to capital schemes including ICT upgrades and replacement of the schools minibuses

Catcote School had made a total growth request of £0.508m. This would cover increases from growth in pupil numbers and pupil need and make a revenue contribution to capital schemes including refurbishments to offices, toilets, the conservatory roof and ICT. Council officers had reviewed this request and identified where reductions could be made to this growth request reducing it to £0.453m.

Schools Forum had been consulted on these proposals and given their support. However they did ask that consideration be given to funding a Life Skills Room refurbishment at Catcote School should there be an underspend in 2024/25.

Decision

- I. That the growth proposals of £0.179 for Springwell School for 2025-26 as recommended by Schools Forum be approved.
- II. That the growth proposals of £0.453 for Catcote School for 2025-26 as recommended by Schools Forum be approved.

33. Sendiass Annual Report (*Executive Director of Children's Services*)

Type of decision

For information

Purpose of report

To present the Annual Report of the Hartlepool Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS) for September 2024 to July 2025.

Issue(s) for consideration

Members were provided with the background to the SENDIASS Service. The Committee was referred to the SENDIASS Annual report, attached at Appendix 1, which provided a key overview of the information, advice and support being offered to children, young people (aged 0-25 years) and their parent/carers about matters related to Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND). Between September 2024 and July 2025 SENDIASS had provided information, advice and support for 321 cases, details of which were set out in the report.

Members welcomed the report and commented on the benefits of the service which helped parents and carers of children with SEND navigate a complicated landscape. The Sendiass Manager was praised for the level of detail in the report and the outstanding work the team had carried out.

Decision

That the contents of the Annual Report of SENDIASS 2024/25 be noted and published online.

34. Children's Social Care Annual Complaints Report 2025/25 *(Executive Director of Children's Services)*

Type of decision

For information

Purpose of report

To present the Annual Report of Children's Social Care Complaints and Compliments 2024/25

Issue(s) for consideration

The Assistant Director for Early Intervention, Performance and Commissioning presented the report which provided an analysis of complaints and compliments, outlining the outcome and any subsequent actions undertaken. 76 complaints had been received, 60 of which were statutory. Of these 35 had gone forward for further investigation. 16 complaints had been in the scope of the corporate complaints procedure about children's social care. 12 of these had gone through for further investigation.

In addition to the above, the Department had received 6 compliments, details of which were included in the report.

A member referred to the large number of complaints made using the online electronic form, querying whether this was a generic form. The Assistant Director for Early Intervention, Performance and Commissioning advised that while this was a standard form all complaints made in this way had been individual and specific. In terms of the number of compliments she felt that collation of these could be improved as she didn't think that they were reflective of the good practice and staff needed to be reminded to send these through.

Decision

That the contents of the Annual Report of Complaints and Compliments 2024/25 be noted and published online.

35. SEND, Inclusion and Alternative Provision - Presentation

Type of decision

For information

Purpose of report

To detail the work carried out by the SEND and Inclusion Team.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Senior Advisor (Inclusive Learning and SEND) gave a presentation outlining the work carried out by the SEND and Inclusion Team. Information on the staffing structure of the team was given with emphasis on the small number of permanent staff compared with those employed on a temporary funding basis. Information on the numbers being given SEN support, both with and without an EHCP was detailed. The overarching governance structure of the team was shown with details of the 6 objectives, each of which was considered by an individual Working Party.

Members thanked the Senior Advisor for her presentation and the work carried out by the Team as a whole. This was especially reassuring to parents of SEND children who could feel confident that their child was being fully supported in mainstream education. The Chair noted that while parents usually wanted their child to attend their local school this may not be the best place for them due to Schools being unable to provide the appropriate support for them. The Schools and Inclusion Team needed to work together to ensure that children with SEN could be included in mainstream education wherever possible. Members felt that the number of SEND children in mainstream education was higher than calculated and parents needed to keep their expectations realistic in terms of what a mainstream school could provide. A member also raised concerns around diagnostic routes and the current backlog. The Chair suggested a presentation on this might be brought to Committee in future.

Decision

That the presentation be noted

The meeting concluded at 5:55pm

H MARTIN

DIRECTOR OF LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN RESOURCES

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