



Hartlepool
Borough Council

Children's Services Committee

Minutes and Decision Record

10 March 2026

Meeting commenced

Time: 4:00pm

Location: Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Hartlepool

Present:

Councillor: Melanie Morley (In the Chair)

Councillors: Moss Boddy, Bob Buchan, Martin Dunbar, Brenda Harrison, Philip Holbrook and Sue Little

Co-opted members:

Gillian Hood, C of E Diocesan Representative

Joanne Wilson, RC Diocesan Representative

Also present: Councillor Amanda Napper

Christine Fewster, Hartlepool Carers Chief Executive

Oliver Huerrman, Member of Youth Parliament

Officers: Alison Sutherland, Executive Director of Children's Services
Julie Reed, Capital, Governance Site and Systems Manager
Sandra Shears, Head of Finance - Corporate and Schools
Zoe McKenna, Youth Education and Pathways Strategy Lead
Fiona Stobbs, Senior Advisor Inclusive Learning and SEND
Kelly Armstrong, Strategic Children Commissioner

45. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were submitted by Martin Pout, Parent Governor representative.

46. Declarations of Interest

None

47. Minutes

Minutes from 3 February 2026 - received

48. **Carers Strategy 2026-2031** (*Executive Director of Children's Services*)

Type of Decision

Non-Key

Purpose of Report

To endorse the Carers Strategy 2026-2031 and approve the development and implementation of a dedicated Young Carers Strategy

Issue(s) for consideration

The Chief Executive of Hartlepool Carers introduced a brief presentation on Hartlepool's Young Carers. A number of Young Carers were present at the meeting and spoke about their day to day experiences. In response to questions from members they requested that schools give their caring role more recognition, that they be given more leniency around attendance and timekeeping and that more respite be made available to them. The Chief Executive of Hartlepool Carers noted that she had previously requested that free bus passes be made available to young carers in the Tees Valley but had been told this would not be possible. Members were supportive of young carers and their positive impact on family dynamics and Council finances. They made the following suggestions:

- That the Young Carers be invited to attend a Headteacher's meeting
- Ensure schools are made aware that pupils are young carers
- That the Committee write to the Tees Valley Mayor formally requesting that young carers be given free bus passes

- That updates on young carers be included at future Children's Services Committee agendas.

Members considered the Carers Strategy 2026-2031 which had been shaped by the priorities and lived experiences of carers themselves. Details were given of the 8 priority areas within the report. A Young Carers Strategy would also be developed, focussing on specific actions impacting on children's social care and ensuring continued improvement in how young carers are supported.

Decision

- I. That the Carers' Strategy 2026-2031 and development of a Young Carer's Strategy be noted and endorsed
- II. That the Young Carers be invited to attend a Headteacher's meeting
- III. That the Committee write to the Tees Valley Mayor formally requesting that young carers be given free bus passes
- IV. That updates on young carers be included at future Children's Services Committee agendas.

49. 2026-27 Schools' Capital Works Programme (*Executive Director, Children's Services*)

Type of Decision

Key

Purpose of Report

To seek approval to the 2026-27 Schools' Capital Works Programme in order to progress the design and detailed costing exercise in time for the majority of projects to be carried out during the school holiday period. Details are provided in the confidential Appendix A. **This item contained exempt information under Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972 (as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006) namely, information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).**

Issue(s) for consideration

The report provided background information in relation to capital funding allocations. At the time of writing the report, capital funding allocations for 2026/27 had not been communicated to the Local Authority. Approval was sought for the schemes proposed in confidential Appendix A subject to the local authority agreeing schools contributing a minimum of 10% towards the condition schemes. **This item (Appendix A) contained exempt information under Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended by**

the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006), namely information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) (Para 3).

The Committee was referred to Table 1 which outlined the total funding available of £1,126,420 for works and Table 2 which detailed the total cost of schemes proposed including a contingency of £120,000 of which Members' approval was sought.

Decision

- a. That the schedule of 2026/27 capital works programme as summarised in confidential Appendix A be approved subject contributions from school towards individual schemes be agreed in line with the share funding principles established by the Schools Forum

- b. That the Executive Director of Children's Services be given dispensation and discretion to authorise works where an emergency or significant health and safety risk is exposed in consultation with the Chair of Children's Services Committee

50. Dedicated Schools Grant – High Needs Block 2026/27 *(Executive Director of Children's Services and Director of Finance, IT and Digital)*

Type of Decision

Key

Purpose of Report

To provide details of the 2026/27 High Needs Block (HNB) funding allocation within the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and present the draft budget requirement for High Needs Block spending

Issue(s) for consideration

The High Needs Block funding allocation for 2026/27 was published by Government on 17 December 2025. In previous years this had been based on a national funding formula however this year the funding was frozen at 2025/26 levels other than the rolling in of separate grants that would need to be passed on to providers. This meant that no inflation had been funded against the HNB for 2026/27.

The total high needs funding for 2026/27 is £18.954m. This is after £4.108m recoupmnt for academy place funding and includes transfers from the Schools Block and Central School Services Block as previously approved by Committee. While the Hartlepool allocation had increased by 5.98% this increase related solely to grant funding which must be passed on to providers and is not available for growth or financial pressures.

Hartlepool continues to experience spending pressures against the HNB and at the end of March 2025 the overall DSG deficit stood at £4.932m, expected to increase to £10.348m this financial year. As a result of this ongoing deficit the Department for Education had requested a 10-year DSG management plan. The latest update suggests a provisional deficit position of £22m by end of March 2028, the date when the statutory override provided through accounting regulations is scheduled to end. The budget requirement proposed for 2026/27 exceeds the High Needs block funding allocation by £7.360m.

The detailed high needs block planned spend for 2026/27 was set out in the report. The upcoming SEND white paper will provide significant direction for the authority's strategic plans for SEND provision and as such they did not feel confident to make firm budget proposals ahead of its publication. However 2 strategic change proposals have been included in the current budget proposals: the establishment of a primary phase AP unit and to partner with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) specialist provider to set up a Hartlepool provision for the growing level of ASD need. Both would avoid more costly out of town pupil placement.

Schools Forum had considered these budget requirements over 2 meetings on 26 January 2026 and 10 February 2026 and had rejected the budget proposals. Their reasons were given within the report

Decision

- I. That the report be noted
- II. That the feedback from Schools Forum be noted
- III. That the budget proposal for 2026/27 be approved and the funding gap of £7.360m acknowledged

51. 2027-28 School Term and Holiday Dates (*Executive Director for Children's Services*)

Type of Decision

Non-Key

Purpose of Report

To obtain approval for the proposed pattern of school term and holiday dates for the Community Schools for the 2027-28 academic year and to seek agreement to recommend these dates to governing bodies of Foundation schools and Academies in Hartlepool.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Local Authority and governing bodies of Foundation schools and Academies work together to ensure a consistent pattern across the town in respect of school term and holiday dates.

In the autumn/spring terms representatives from the Tees Valley region and other north east representatives consulted on a pattern for 2027-28 based on the guiding principles, details of which were set out in Appendix 1. The proposed pattern enabled schools to begin the academic year on Wednesday 2 September 2027 and end the year on Friday 21 July 2028.

Following consultation with Head Teachers in Hartlepool and also relevant associations in relation to the school year pattern for 2027-2028 the general consensus from the local authorities within the Tees Valley and other regional authorities was to adopt the model attached at Appendix 1.

Decision

- I. That the scheduled term and holiday dates for the academic year 2027-2028 for Community Schools be approved
- II. That the schedule of term and holiday dates for 2027-2028 be recommended to governing bodies of Foundation Schools and Academies in Hartlepool.

52. Corporate Parent Forum – Proposed Changes *(Executive Director, Children’s Services)*

Type of Decision

Non-Key

Purpose of Report

To seek the Committee’s views on changing the format and frequency of the Council’s Corporate Parent Forum

Issue(s) for consideration

The Executive Director for Children’s Services advised members of the suggested changes to the format of the Corporate Parent Forum as follows:

- A move from being a formal sub-committee of Children's Services Committee to an internal officer-member led meeting reporting directly to Children's Services Committee with recommendations for consideration and approval.
- Membership expansion to include representation from every Council directorate, Hartlepool Further Education College, wider health services, police, fire and the voluntary sector.
- Development of dedicated champions for key areas including housing and accommodation and training and education.
- A co-chairing arrangement with a young person chairing alongside the lead member for Children's Services.
- Children in Care Council representatives be enabled to speak on behalf of all children in care.
- Increase in meeting frequency to 6 bi-monthly meetings a year

Members discussed the proposals. Some felt that limiting the Councillor membership to 7 would discourage others from attending and that all councillors should attend. The Strategic Children's Commissioner advised that representatives from Pathfinders had indicated they felt that the Forum was tokenistic and more training of Councillors was needed. A member felt that the Corporate Parent Forum should hold the Children's Services Committee to account in the mould of Audit and Governance Committee. It should have more authority to act on behalf of partners and stakeholders and be less political than Children's Services Committee with a different Chair. The Executive Director for Children's Services advised that these proposals were due to be considered at Constitution Committee the following morning and would seek further clarity from legal services colleagues regarding the proposed changes following discussion at Committee this evening prior to the Constitution Committee meeting. The member acknowledged this but felt it would be an opportunity to hold the political leadership to account.

Decision

That the proposed changes contained within the report be referred to Constitution Committee for further consideration with the following additions/amendments:

- That the Councillor membership be opened up to include all elected members
- That Corporate Parent Forum be less political and serve to scrutinise the work of the Children's Services Committee
- That the Executive Director of Children's Services update the Lead Member for Children's Services following Constitution Committee being held on 11 March 2026.

Councillors Buchan, Holbrook and Little left the meeting during consideration of the above item

3. Any Other Items which the Chairman Considers are Urgent

The Chair ruled that the following items of business should be considered by the Committee as a matter of urgency in accordance with the provisions of Section 100(B) (4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972 in order that the matter could be dealt with without delay.

The member of the Youth Parliament advised that this would be his last Children's Services Committee before the election of his successor. He gave a brief update of his recent and future work including a visit to Downing Street for the launch of the Youth Select Committee Report. The Chair thanked him for his hard work during his tenure and wished him well for the future.

The Youth Education and Pathways Strategy Lead gave an update on the Youth Transformation Fund pilot project. The areas highlighted had included the development of a strategic plan, promotion of a youth offering, development of a marketing strategy and a training package for youth workers and young people. The full programme was expected to be complete by August 2026. The Chair expressed the thanks of the Committee to all those involved in the project.

The Senior Advisor for Inclusive Learning and SEND gave an update on the recent Education Summit, Attendees had included the Secretary of State for Education and following this, officers were now working on the development of an education strategy.. The Chair thanked everyone involved for their work on the Summit

A member queried whether more funding might be made available to schools for SEN provision given the focus on SEN in the forthcoming white paper. The Executive Director for Children's Services acknowledged that funding was being made available however when it would be received was unclear as were the specifics of these allocations. Officers were in the process of undertaking a mapping exercise regarding alternative provision: what we have and where our gaps are; and the Chair asked that schools let them know about any specific requirements. The Senior Advisor for Inclusive Learning and SEND indicated that there was significant work to do around funding for SEN provision and lots expected but minimal detail at the moment.

The Chair paid tribute to the Assistant Director for Education who was retiring tomorrow. She also noted that this was the last Children's Services Committee of the municipal year and potentially her last meeting as Chair. She thanked everyone involved during her tenure for their help and support saying that being chair had been a privilege and pleasure.

The meeting concluded at 5:50pm

H MARTIN

DIRECTOR OF LEGAL GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN RESOURCES

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