

PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, Lewes on 20 November 2025.

PRESENT Councillors Johanna Howell (Chair), Kathryn Field (Vice Chair), Colin Belsey, Anne Cross, John Ungar, Matthew Beaver, Chris Dowling and John Hayling (Parent Governor Representative)

Lesley Hurst, Diocese of Chichester Representative attended online.

LEAD MEMBERS Councillor Bob Bowdler, Lead Member for Children and Families
Councillor Bob Standley, Lead Member for Education, and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability
Councillor Carl Maynard, Lead Member for Adult Social Care and Health (attended online)

ALSO PRESENT Carolyn Fair Director of Children's Services
Ian Gutsell Chief Finance Officer
Mark Stainton Director of Adult Social Care and Health
Douglass Sinclair, Head of Children's Safeguards & Quality Assurance (online)
Rachel Sweeney, Senior Policy and Scrutiny Adviser

17. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 22 SEPTEMBER 2025

17.1 The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 22 September as a correct record.

18. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

18.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Geary and Swansborough. Lesley Hurst attended the meeting online.

19. DISCLOSURES OF INTERESTS

19.1 There were no disclosures of interest.

20. URGENT ITEMS

20.1 There were no urgent items.

21. RECONCILING POLICY PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES (RPPR)

21.1 The Director of Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) introduced the report which incorporated the recent RPPR Cabinet report which provided an update on the policy context, the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), capital programme, and the Council's response to significant financial pressures. The report presented a further opportunity for the Committee to ask questions on the planning context and to request any additional information required for the RPPR Board in December.

21.2 The Director of ASCH outlined that pressures continued to be significant and ASCH's priorities to respond to these challenges remained unchanged.

21.3 The Director of Children's Services (CSD) outlined the key pressures in CSD, including rising demand for services and an increase in complex needs, growth in special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), which in turn increased Home to School Transport (HTST) costs. National reforms, including the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, the Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life strategy and the awaited Schools White Paper, which was anticipated to include significant reforms to SEND, were focussed on early intervention and prevention and this would continue to drive the Department's response to these pressures and meeting need.

21.4 The Chief Finance Officer outlined the financial position of the Council as detailed in the report, including the stark financial challenge, with a revenue deficit of £55m, an update on the capital programme, and the insufficient reserves needed to meet the deficit. The report also set out key information awaited from Government, with a Policy Statement expected imminently in response to the Fair Funding Review 2.0. The report outlined the next steps to set a balanced budget, including preparations needed to apply for Exceptional Financial Support and a request to seek further savings. The CIPFA review had provided assurance of good financial management and governance in the Council and noted a clear understanding of the challenges across Members and officers.

21.5 The Committee asked the following questions:

- **Crowborough site funding:** The Committee asked about funding implications if the Home Office proposal to house asylum seekers at a former army training camp in Crowborough proceeds, particularly in regard to safeguarding responsibilities. The Director of ASCH confirmed no discussions on funding had taken place and any local funding would be for the Home Office to agree with district and borough councils. Statutory duties would mostly be limited to Public Health and infection prevention and control, with minimal anticipated Care Act responsibilities. The welfare, care and support of individuals was the responsibility of the Home Office to resource on site. Although the Council had a responsibility to safeguard vulnerable adults, recent experiences of housing asylum seekers in hotels in the county suggested there would be robust internal safeguarding procedures in place.
- **Service costs** – The Committee sought assurance that efforts were being made to keep costs of services down, particularly for services experiencing inflated costs due to high demand and low competition. The Director of CSD responded that work was underway regionally and nationally to manage the care market and ensure value for money, including through the regional care co-operative. The Director of ASCH reiterated a similar approach in ASCH and commented that for older people's care the Council was able to publish its own rates and for working age adults, a care funding calculator was used to support with fee negotiations. There was also work underway across Sussex to grow the market for adults with complex needs with the aim of reducing costs and providing quality care locally.

21.6 The Committee noted the information that was awaited from Government and agreed to hold a further discussion when more detail would be available at its RPPR Board in December.

21.7 The Committee RESOLVED to note the information in the attached RPPR Cabinet report of 11 November 2025.

22. EAST SUSSEX SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP (ESSCP) ANNUAL REPORT

22.1 The Director of Children's Services introduced the report which outlined work of the Partnership during 24/25. The report detailed changes to the partnership arrangements, including strengthened education involvement and that the new education subgroup had been cited by the Department for Education as an example of good practice. The core function of the Partnership remained to provide leadership to all agencies, critical thinking and professional

challenge, embedding a culture of continuous learning, oversight and assurance on single and multi-agency safeguarding practice. The report set out key achievements, including training, case reviews and multi-agency audits; safeguarding priorities for 2025/26, including safeguarding in education, safeguarding adolescents and learning and development; the development of ESSCP scrutiny, with the recruitment of young scrutineers; and an ongoing focus on strengthening quality assurance.

22.3 The Head of Children's Safeguards & Quality Assurance reiterated that there had a period of change within the ESSCP but that it remained a mature and effective partnership.

22.4 The Committee welcomed the report and thanked officers for their work. The involvement of lay people and young people was also welcomed.

22.5 The Committee asked questions in the following areas:

- **Digital safety** – The Committee raised concerns about online bullying, artificial intelligence (AI), and emerging technologies, asking what strategies were in place to keep children safe. The Director explained that this remained a key and evolving priority. Training was provided to school leaders to manage risks linked to bullying, anxiety, attendance, and decisions by some parents to electively home educate (EHE). However, the complexity of these issues required a whole-system response. Many schools now had roles dedicated to AI and digital strategy to identify opportunities and manage risks. The Director emphasised the importance of understanding young people's relationship with digital technology and AI, noting that while risks exist, many young people report feeling safer online. The Committee discussed recent examples of banning smartphones in schools; the Lead Member for Education and ISEND commented that such measures were often ineffective, as students find workarounds. The Director reiterated the need to engage young people in these discussions, particularly in light of concerns about future job opportunities.
- **School exclusions** – The Committee enquired about the number of Early Years children who had been excluded as outlined in the report. The Director commented that there were challenges in the county around exclusions and attendance, as well as increasing numbers of children EHE, although noted this had reduced and expected quarter three monitoring data to reflect this. Data was used to track exclusions, and work continued with schools to prevent exclusions and support children, although schools ultimately made these decisions. Exclusions for Early Years children was likely due to unmet SEND needs, and it was hoped that changes to the Ofsted Framework, which had a greater emphasis on inclusion, attendance and exclusions, would reduce children being excluded. The Director commented on the increase in EHE due to some parents feeling that their child's needs were not being met and that work was continuing with families to return children to mainstream education.
- **Self harm** – The Committee asked if the number of children reported as attending A&E due to self harm were children in care or from the wider community. The Director clarified that this was the wider community.
- **ESSCP scrutiny** – The Committee welcomed the involvement of young people in the scrutiny arrangements of the ESSCP and discussed the use of youth voice in the People Committee, noting examples of youth voice in other forums including the Corporate Parenting panel, although acknowledged that this would need to be managed to ensure young people felt comfortable. The Director commented that the young scrutineers had only recently been recruited but that there could be opportunities for them to engage with the Committee. The role of the partnership was to ensure that youth voice was central to shaping its views and work. The Lead Member for Education and ISEND commented on his positive experiences with engaging with young people through a variety of settings.

22.6 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report.

23. OFSTED FOCUSED VISIT OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES DEPARTMENT

23.1 The Director of Children's Services introduced the report which outlined the findings of the Ofsted Focused Inspection of the East Sussex Children's Services 23 -31 July 2025. The inspection focused on Children in need or subject to a protection plan. The report was overall positive, with the improvements made following the last ILACS in 2023 recognised, as was the robust support and services provided for vulnerable children and the Department's focus on a stable, skilled and valued workforce.

23.2 The Lead Member for Children and Families commented on the positive report and thanked staff for their excellent work in a challenging environment.

23.3 The Committee welcomed the positive findings in the report and thanked the Director as well as the wider team and RESOLVED to note the report.

24. WORK PROGRAMME

24.1 The Chair introduced the work programme report which outlined the Committee's latest work programme and noted that the Committee had reviewed this in detail at its recent away day.

Home to School Transport

24.2 John Hayling (Parent Governor Representative) provided an update on the work of the scoping board which met in October to consider a scrutiny review of Home to School Transport. The Board received a presentation on, and considered, service demand, budget pressures and cost avoidance strategies. The Board discussed legal constraints, procurement challenges and alternative transport models and considered where a scrutiny review could most add value.

24.3 The Board concluded that in light of the current statutory framework, and pending national SEND reforms, a broad review of Home to School Transport would be unfeasible. However, there was value in conducting a focused scrutiny review on Personal Transport Budgets (PTB) and Independent Travel Training (ITT) where there is potential for the Council to develop local practice, and therefore recommended that a scrutiny review was undertaken to focus on how the Council can increase uptake of Personal Transport Budgets and Independent Travel Training.

24.4 Councillor Belsey commented on the positive training Members had recently received on HTST.

24.5 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the Terms of Reference for the scrutiny review of Personal Transport Budgets and Independent Travel Training in School Transport.

24.6 Councillor Cross requested that the potential decision by the Home Office to house asylum seekers at the Training Camp at Crowborough in relation to local safeguarding responsibilities and arrangements was included on the work programme.

24.7 The Director of ASCH assured the Committee any safeguarding concerns would be overseen by the Safeguarding Adults Board, and community cohesion related concerns would be overseen by Wealden Community Safety Partnership and commented that these would fall outside the remit of the People Scrutiny Committee, however this could be kept under review as more information was provided by the Home Office.

24.8 Councillors Belsey and Howell commented that this was currently still under review from the Home Office and the situation was not currently within the remit of the Committee.

24.9 Forward plan

24.10 The Committee reviewed the Council's Forward Plan of executive decisions.

Work Programme

24.11 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the updated work programme.

25. CARE QUALITY COMMISSION ASSESSMENT OF ADULT SOCIAL CARE

25.1 The Chair informed the Board that the meeting was no longer quorate and therefore the following items would be considered on a non-statutory basis and that the resolutions of the Committee for these items would be formally agreed at its next meeting.

25.2 The Director of ASCH introduced the report which outlined the recent CQC assessment of ASCH which had resulted in a rating of 'Good'. The report highlighted strong partnerships, an excellent work force, and that the Department knows itself and its residents well. The Director welcomed comments from the Committee on the report as well as ongoing scrutiny input through the CQC Reference Group, to ensure effective challenge of the Department's response to the CQC recommendations through its improvement plans, as well as preparatory work for future assessments.

25.3 The Committee welcomed the positive findings in the report and thanked the Department, as well as wider partners, who had contributed to the CQC assessment.

25.4 The Committee asked questions in the following areas:

- **Care Act Waiting lists** – The Committee asked about the approach to reduce waiting lists for Care Act assessments. The Director responded that although ESCC performed well nationally in terms of waiting lists, waits devalued the service and targeted work was underway to define waiting lists (noting various circumstances that could fall out of ESCC control), understand the issue further, and to develop a consistent approach. Data was being used to provide greater clarity for monitoring and to create heat maps to highlight age breakdowns of people on waiting lists. This approach, as well as proportionate assessments and a trust assessor approach to reduce duplication, had resulted in a reduction in waiting lists. Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) was being piloted to further assist the assessment process through case file recording, with the aim to free up practitioner time and further reduce waiting lists. Councillor Ungar requested that this was looked at further within the CQC Reference Group.
- **Use of technology in assessments** – The Committee discussed the use of AI and reviews conducted via telephone and asked if this allowed for professional curiosity into people's living conditions, and if this indicated staff shortages. The Director responded the Department endeavoured to conduct face to face Care Act assessments in all instances, however immediate care could be provided in response to a crisis or emergency following a telephone conversation. For assessment reviews, these should be proportionate and alternative methods sought, including clinics, video and telephone calls. The Director commented that it was still important to see people in their homes, but this could be through other agencies and highlighted the role of Integrated Community Teams in this. The use of AI was being piloted to support practitioners to improve response times to assessments and reviewing need.
- **Financial assessment** – The Committee asked for more information about the CQC finding that information around Financial Assessments was not consistently made clear to people and noted the challenges for some people in understanding this information and the need to consider likely difficult circumstances. The Director noted that information could be complex and agreed that repetition was needed when providing information to ensure people understood it as well as

offering follow up conversations. The Director noted that the CQC had fed back on the clarity of some of this information and informed the Committee that the Department worked with the Citizen's Panel and the People Bank to ensure communications were clear, whilst still detailing the necessary complex messages, but commented that this would remain under review.

- **Carers** – The Committee sought clarification on how the Committee would progress work on the Carer's Partnership Programme which had previously been identified as an area of interest by the Committee. The Senior Policy and Scrutiny Adviser confirmed that this topic was on the work programme as a potential future topic for a review and could commence once the review into Personal Transport Budgets and Independent Travel Training had been completed, however a briefing could be arranged prior to this. The Director of ASCH reiterated that supporting carers was a priority for the Council, given their contribution to the county.

25.5 The Committee RESOLVED to consider the outcome of the Care Quality Commission's (CQC) Assessment of Adult Social Care in East Sussex and to monitor and review the development and implementation of departmental actions in response to the CQC report through the CQC Reference Group.

26. REVIEW OF ASCH SAVINGS PROPOSALS

26.1 The Director of ASCH introduced the report which outlined the progress of ASCH savings proposals implemented in 2025, including the impact of these savings on individuals, carers, staff, and associated property.

26.2 The Director commented that transitions for people and carers to alternative provision had been successful, with minimal disruption, although acknowledged some level of disruption was unavoidable.

26.3 Appendix B of the report detailed staffing changes from the savings proposals and the Director noted that across all savings, there had been five compulsory redundancies, with strong efforts made to redeploy staff where possible.

26.4 Appendix C of the report detailed current actual/estimated savings against original forecasted savings. The Director noted the change from the original proposal to close Linden Court day service for people with a Learning Disability and merge it with Beeching Park day service, to a revised proposal to retain the service at Linden Court which had reduced the savings forecast. There had also been slippage across other savings due to staffing processes and transition. However, all savings were due to be delivered by the next financial year.

26.5 The Committee asked questions in the following areas:

- **Staffing** – The Committee acknowledged the difficult time for staff during this process, noting that some had resigned before it was complete, and sought assurance that remaining staff in different roles were supported, both within their roles and in terms of wider wellbeing. The Director clarified that all staff were inducted into new roles with full training and support and there was a good wellbeing offer from the Council for all staff which staff and managers were aware of.
- **Housing-Related Floating Support** – The Committee discussed the impacts of reducing funding for Housing-Related Floating Support on district and borough councils and ASC staff - the report noted an increased workload with housing related support tasks. The Committee also asked if work had been done to understand potential impacts on a future unitary authority. The Director stated that while the service is valued, funding was reduced to prioritise statutory services, as districts and boroughs held primary responsibility. District and

borough councils agreed to match ESCC funding to help mitigate impacts, notably for homelessness prevention, but the exact effects on housing departments remained unclear amid ongoing sector challenges. Increased signposting to housing support had been considered for front-line staff when proposals were made and were in line with expectations. The Director commented that there had not yet been work on the impact of the saving on a potential unitary authority and noted the recent launch of the Government consultation on two proposals for local government reorganisation which would have very different implications for those services.

26.6 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report.

The meeting ended at 12.12 pm.

Councillor Johanna Howell (Chair)

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