

Children, Young People, Families & Learning Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Work Programme Review 2025/26

Introduction

Throughout the 2025/26 municipal year, the Children, Young People, Families & Learning Overview and Scrutiny Commission maintained a strong programme of formal meetings, supported by structured informal sessions. While the Commission had the flexibility to use workshops for deep-dive work, the scale and pace of national reform across children's services, coupled with continued operational pressures in social care, learning and SEND, meant that the Commission met formally each month and incorporated additional informal learning sessions where beneficial.

The year was characterised by:

- Major national announcements affecting SEND, post-16 skills, family help, childcare reform, and inspection frameworks.
- Continued workforce stabilisation within Children's Social Care and the transition away from historic levels of agency staffing.
- Increasing demand pressures across statutory social care, SEND assessment, EHE monitoring, and home-to-school transport.
- Significant service transformation work including the SEND Integrated Hub, Family Hubs/Best Start delivery, and the Families First Partnership Programme.
- Rising complexity in educational needs, post-16 transitions and NEET prevention.
- Ongoing performance improvements across safeguarding, EHCP timeliness, care leaver outcomes and stabilising referral patterns.

Meetings were consistently attended by senior officers from across Children, Young People and Family Services, including the Executive Director, Assistant Directors, Heads of Service and Strategic Leads. Representatives from Humberside Police attended specifically for the December 2025 session to support scrutiny of the national Casey Audit on group-based exploitation. The Portfolio Holder for Children's Services attended regularly to support political accountability.

Members provided robust performance challenge, strengthened accountability arrangements, and ensured that national reforms were contextualised for Hull's local circumstances. Alongside the regular monitoring reports, a focus has also been placed on the inspection of the local authorities' children's services for which Hull has now received a grading of requires improvement to be good following an Ofsted inspection undertaken November 2022. An Ofsted inspection was undertaken across February 2026 to March 2026.

Directorate Updates

The Executive Director provided regular updates to the Commission allowing for most recent and up to date information being shared with a particular focus on improvement activity and a snapshot of current initiatives. This provides an opportunity for the Commission to raise any issues of concern/queries with the Corporate Director on all aspects of service delivery and strategic direction. Requests for further in-depth reports/informal sessions are often a result of these briefings which in turn form some of the areas of focus as described below.

Topics raised during these updates included:

- Preparation for Ofsted's full ILACS inspection.
- Progress on the SEND Integrated Hub and wider SEND reforms.
- Children's Homes sufficiency, use of temporary provision, and in-house workforce stabilisation.
- Attendance strategies and the introduction of multi-agency attendance panels.
- Growth of Elected Home Education (EHE) and improvement actions.
- Pressures within High Needs, EHCP timeliness, and educational psychology capacity.
- Domestic abuse trends, early intervention and whole-family responses.
- Healthy Holidays (HAF) delivery and the continuation of funding.
- Performance trends across referrals, assessments, care leavers, and safeguarding.

Portfolio Holder Priorities

The Commission received a report on the priorities of the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services for 2025-26.

The Portfolio Holder for Children's Services attended to set out strategic priorities, including:

- Delivering a Child-Friendly City approach.
- Embedding the Children & Young People's Plan 2025–2030.
- Improving outcomes for Children Looked After and care leavers.
- Strengthening Corporate Parenting.
- Driving improvements in SEND support, outreach, inclusion and EHCP timeliness.
- Increasing school attendance and reducing persistent absence.
- Leading on Families First Partnership activity and wider social care reform.
- Improving early years outcomes and speech & language development.
- Reducing NEET through strengthened post-16 pathways.

The Commission engaged in detailed discussions with the Portfolio Holder on bullying, digital safety, mental health, post-16 transitions, staff wellbeing, and the impact of national curriculum changes on relationship and social/emotional learning.

Topic Areas

Budget Monitoring

The Commission received regular budget updates as part of the Council's wider budget monitoring framework. Pressures centred on Safeguarding and Children's Placements, the use of temporary children's homes for complex cases, and the Dedicated Schools Grant (High Needs) deficit. Mitigations included workforce stabilisation (reduced agency), increased in-house sufficiency, efficiencies in homes and tenancy support, and improved commissioning.

Performance Monitoring & Quality

The Commission receives quarterly performance reports to enable them to monitor progress in relation to a number of measures. Quarterly performance highlighted:

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- Sustained reductions in referrals and Children in Need plans.
- A positive trajectory in assessment timeliness (45-day and 20-week EHCP measures).
- Improved long-term stability supported by a more permanent workforce.
- Child Protection plans increasing but stabilising below earlier predicted levels.
- Improved outcomes for care leavers including increased participation in EET and suitable accommodation.
- Continued high levels of domestic abuse-related referrals requiring whole-system responses.
- Increased numbers of children educated at home requiring additional monitoring and support for families.

The Commission requested deeper insight into referral drivers, mental health support pathways, domestic abuse definitions, and elected home education categories.

SEND Improvement and the Integrated SEND Hub

SEND remained a significant theme throughout the year. The Commission received updates on:

- DfE monitoring and positive feedback on Hull's improvement journey.
- Stronger SEN support within schools and improved multi-agency practice.
- A major move to the new SEND Integrated Hub at Lil Bilocca House, with co-produced spaces and increased access to specialist services.
- Plans for Phase 2: indoor sensory garden, gaming rooms, health clinics and outreach expansion.
- Early years SEND pressures and the alignment of local work with forthcoming national reform pillars.

Members highlighted the need for continued inclusion work, improved communication with families, and clear visibility of outstanding improvement actions.

Later in-year, a consolidated SEND Improvement Plan was trailed to align with national reform pillars; a workshop was proposed to focus on a single pillar and support development of the new plan.

Early Years Sufficiency

Members supported proposals to maintain early years places in the North Area (McMillan Nursery satellite with Venn Trust) and creation of a SEND unit, noting positive outcomes and location clarity for future reports.

Education, Attainment & Post-16 Transitions

A suite of reports on young people's outcomes highlighted:

- Year 11 destination patterns, including reduced uptake of sixth-form school places and national decline in apprenticeships.
- Level 2 and Level 3 attainment gaps, particularly for FSM-eligible pupils.
- Structural issues affecting NEET, such as mid-year transitions, churn, post-16 drop-off and social/economic pressures.

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- Plans for a city summit with academies and independent providers to align post-16 pathways and improve retention.
- Challenges in EHCP demand and the impact on EHCNA timing and Educational Psychology capacity.

The Commission explored bursary access, transport barriers, careers guidance, and the complexity of needs emerging post-pandemic.

Holiday Activities & Food (HAF) and Best Start Family Hubs

Members received updates on the three-year HAF allocation to 2029. Key themes included:

- Tension between national rules (15% discretionary places) and Hull's deprivation profile.
- The importance of universal access, especially for families close to the FSM threshold.
- The role of HAF in prevention, youth safety and community cohesion.
- Concerns linked to the impact of reduced ICB capacity and wider voluntary sector pressures.

Best Start / Family Hubs programme 2026–29 planning focused on improving Good Level of Development (GLD), particularly speech, language and communication and strengthening early years outreach through targeted interventions and enhanced multi-agency collaboration. Actions included referrals to Health OSC, off-agenda GLD data, and a GLD workshop was proposed.

Safeguarding & Assurance

The Commission received updates on:

- The Family First Partnership Programme and its whole-family, whole-life reform approach.
- National reforms to social care practice, including the shift towards family help and early intervention.
- The Casey Audit for Group-Based Exploitation and multi-agency improvement actions.
- Strengthening workforce confidence, stability and practice standards.
- The importance of father engagement, consistency in social worker allocation, and reliable multi-agency oversight.

The Commission noted that Hull's reduced reliance on agency staff had significantly strengthened continuity for children and families.

Home to School Transport

An in-year update detailed demand growth linked to SEND and increased EHCNA volumes; pressures caused by increasingly complex needs and local placement patterns; survey-led service improvements, and safeguarding protocols for route variations and handovers.

Plans for further updates, based on next year's surveys and policy developments, were requested to evidence impact and value alongside a need for clearer communication and service-user feedback loops.

Youth Services and Culture & Leisure

Youth Services updates covered refurbishments, capital developments, Youth Work Week, the mobile youth van model and mapping to target gaps. An outcome report from the July youth work event informed development of a Hull Youth Alliance.

Bright Spots Survey (Your Life Your Care)

Hull reported twelve 'bright spots' with strengths in relationships, education/sport participation, friendship and support, with improvement areas around placement continuity, trust, and wellbeing. An action plan will be monitored via Corporate Parenting and reported back to scrutiny.

Specialist Annual Reports

The Commission received and scrutinised:

- LADO Annual Report 2024–25 — increased referrals, increased demand, improved training oversight.
- Independent Reviewing Service Annual Report — neglect toolkit, virtual/face-to-face reviews, early intervention pathways.
- Private Fostering Annual Report — increased awareness activity and inter-agency communication.
- Youth Justice and related pilot outcomes — positive partnership work and preparation for new inspection frameworks.
- Music Service Annual Report 2024 — growth in participation, accessibility and national partnerships.

Pre-Decision Scrutiny

The Commission has carried out pre-decision scrutiny on the following executive decisions, formulating comments and recommendations for consideration as part of the decision-making process.

- Children & Young People's Plan
- Maintenance of Sufficient Early Years Places in North Area
- Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF) (known locally as Healthy Holidays)
- Best Start Family Hubs
- Education Otherwise Than in School (EOTIS) provision

Informal Workshops/Visits

Over the municipal year the Commission have undertaken the following informal workshop sessions/visits designed to build knowledge and further understanding of operational service delivery:

- Work Programme Development Session
- Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill
- AP (Alternative Provision) Review
- NEET (Informal Deep Dive)

Young People's Scrutiny Engagement Group

Young People's Scrutiny continued to play a vital role in enabling the voice of young people.

Issues included:

- Voting age and democratic engagement.
- Housing and the proposal for a Young Person Champion.
- Care leaver experiences, including council tax exemptions.
- Safety perceptions, digital issues, and trusted relationships with professionals.
- Continued strengthening of feedback loops between scrutiny, CPP and frontline teams.

Full report included at Appendix 1.

Future Work Programme

The Commission will start to shape and develop its work programme for 2026/27 focusing on priority areas and standard items such as performance and budget monitoring. Emerging priorities include:

- NEET pathways and post-16 reforms
- Attendance and unauthorised absence analysis
- SEND reform plan development and governance
- Safeguarding (Casey audit response, Licensing assurance)
- Section 17 and Direct Payments audit follow-through
- Home to School Transport efficiencies
- Bright Spots action plan tracking
- Families First Partnership implementation
- Best Start delivery and GLD impact.

Conclusion

The Commission has maintained a robust and proactive approach to scrutiny throughout the 2025/26 municipal year. The breadth of work undertaken reflects the complexity of the children's services system and the scale of national reforms affecting education, safeguarding and family help.

Despite significant pressures such as demand growth, reform uncertainty, rising complexity in SEND and increasing social need, the Commission has consistently challenged performance, sought stronger assurance, and kept the lived experience of children, young people and families at the centre of its work.

With major national reforms due to take effect in 2026/27, the Commission is well positioned to provide strong challenge, genuine partnership and focused support for continuous improvement in the year ahead.