



Accounting Officer Memorandum

Secure Children's Home Commissioning

It is normal practice for accounting officers to scrutinise significant policy proposals or plans to start or vary major projects, and then assess whether they measure up to the standards set out in Managing Public Money. From April 2017, the government has committed to make a summary of the key points from these assessments available to Parliament when an accounting officer has agreed an assessment of projects within the Government's Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP).

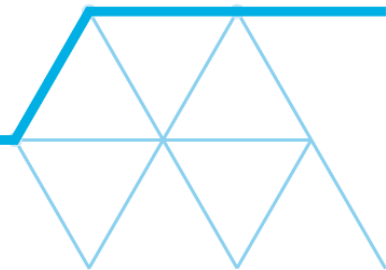
Background and context

The Youth Custody Service (YCS), as part of HMPPS, is responsible for placing children who have been remanded or sentenced into the Children and Young People Secure Estate (CYPSE) and for the provision of sufficient suitable places for those children and it is the YCS' responsibility to provide access to Secure Children's Home (SCH) justice beds.

Secure Children's Homes are operated by Local Authorities (LA) and are the smallest secure settings for boys and girls aged 10-18 with a high ratio of staff to young people. Traditionally it is the youngest and / or vulnerable children that are placed within SCHs in comparison to other secure settings. Many children placed in Secure Children's Homes display extremely challenging and / or risky behaviour including violence, serious self-harm, and sexually harmful behaviour. Their individual needs include significant mental health concerns, neurodivergent conditions and a range of other needs linked directly to adverse childhood experiences – all of which can have a tremendous impact on future violence, victimisation and perpetration and on lifelong health and opportunity.

The objectives of the Secure Children's Home Commissioning Project are to:

- a) Obtain justice provision within the Secure Children's Home sector by December 2025, ensuring bed numbers are within an agreed range of demand requirements, as established by the project and secure availability until 2032.
- b) Acquire Secure Children's Home services by December 2025, that are consistent with the principles of 'child first'; providing both structural support to meet their diverse needs, and personal support that helps positive identity shift towards healthier lives.
- c) Establish where Secure Children's Home places are required and secure agreements/arrangements with enough homes, by December 2025, to ensure a sufficient geographical spread across England and Wales to maintain current or better tailor our future provision proportionate to demand.



- d) Ensure SCH services by December 2025, that are committed to prioritisation of children’s safety and wellbeing, promoting equity of provision and preserves the safety and security of children and young people while in custody.

It should be noted that this project is not novel or contentious and does not require change to primary legislation.

This assessment relates to the Outline Business Case (OBC), which was approved on 18 March 2024 by MoJ Investment Committee and received Cabinet Office approval on 22 May 2024. Progression to HM Treasury approval was delayed by the announcement of the General Election but approval was received from HMT on 17 September 2024.

Assessment against the accounting officer standards

Regularity

Secure Children’s Homes are an existing service which is considered to be regular. Any changes or improvements to the service will be undertaken within the existing responsibilities and legal powers of the YCS. MoJ Government Legal Department (GLD) have been consulted throughout the development of the business case and advice will continue to be taken during the development of the procurement strategy and further outlined in the Full Business Case (FBC).

Propriety

The Secure Children’s Homes Commissioning Project has an established governance structure with agreed processes and tolerances and is supported through a Project Board that underpins the strategic objectives of the programme. Board membership is formed of senior functional leads, cross-government, and project representatives with the remit and capability to support and challenge the SRO in making sound decisions.

Value for Money

This proposal ensures the YCS can continue to provide access to Secure Children’s Home justice beds. Benefits include the delivery of effective outcomes for young people and the prevention of offending by children and young people.

Value for money continues to be addressed through development of performance metrics and lessons learnt from managing the existing contract. Regulators assess a high level of performance of the SCH sector in comparison to other sectors such as the Youth Offender Institutions (YOIs). It is the strategic ambition to reduce the use of YOI places therefore investment in the Secure Children’s Home sector supports this ambition.

Feasibility

The proposal has been assessed as feasible. Project management arrangements, internal governance and assurance processes are in place and embedded to control, oversee, and manage the Secure Children’s Home Commissioning Project.

Conclusion


I have considered this assessment of the SCH Commissioning Project against the four accounting officer responsibilities of regularity, propriety, value for money and feasibility and am satisfied that these responsibilities have been met.

As the Accounting Officer for His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, I considered this assessment of the SCH Commissioning Project and approved it on 28 March 2024.

I have prepared this summary to set out the key points which informed my decision. If any of these factors change materially during the lifetime of this project, I undertake to prepare a revised summary, setting out my assessment of them.

This summary will be published on the government's website (GOV.UK). Copies will be deposited in the Library of the House of Commons and sent to the Comptroller and Auditor General and Treasury Officer of Accounts.

A copy has also been provided to the Principal Accounting Officer for the Ministry of Justice, who has seen my assessment and endorsed my decision on the basis of my assurance that my accounting officer responsibilities are met.



Amy Rees, HMPPS Chief Executive and Accounting Officer