

OCCJ Submission to Scrutiny Panels: Proposed Budget 2026-2029 Review

About the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Jersey

Established by the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Jersey) Law 2019, the Children's Commissioner for Jersey is the independent holder of the public office responsible for promoting and protecting the rights of all children and young people in Jersey who are:

- Under the age of 18;
- Under the age of 25, if they have a disability, have been care experienced or have been sentenced, or held in custody, under the Young Offenders Law;
- Placed off-island for their care or treatment.

In discharging the statutory functions to promote and protect the rights of children and young people the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Jersey (the OCCJ) must regard to any other European or international treaties or conventions, protecting the rights of individuals, which extend or apply to Jersey.

Response to the Proposed Budget 2026 – 2029 Review

The OCCJ welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this review of the Proposed Government Plan 2026–2029. Government budgets are a fundamental mechanism through which children's rights are implemented in practice, shaping the availability, quality, and equity of services that support children's wellbeing. Ensuring that budget decisions reflect and advance the rights of all children is central to the Government's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Questions from the Children, Education and Home Affairs Scrutiny Panel:

1. The Government has proposed a revenue growth allocation for a 'Children's Services Improvement Programme' (see page 22 of the Annex document for further details), which will see an additional £7.615 million of funding in 2026. The Annex describes that the funding will be used for a range of improvements across the residential estate and Children's Service. What are your comments about this funding?

The OCCJ welcomes the proposed £7.615m growth revenues allocation for Children's Services. We have been briefed and informed about the Children's Services Improvement Programme. Having previously raised grave concerns about the implications of the lack of sufficiency of available care placements, we consider this to be an essential investment for some of the Island's most vulnerable children.

Improving the residential estate is part of a wider, considered plan to improve care for children in Jersey. The investment in the residential estate is crucial to provide quality homes for children as these settings have direct implications for their well-being, development, safety

and future outcomes. The improvements will hopefully prevent both the opening of ad-hoc and frequently solo-occupation homes at crisis points and the need for children to be left in unsafe circumstances. Instead, we hope it will bring about increased stability and permanence for children who need to be in the care of the Minister.

Whilst we acknowledge that improving the estate is essential, children in care require more than sound buildings. They also need skilled, stable, well-supported staff to care for them in a therapeutic way and work with other partners to ensure their health, educational and wider rights are fulfilled. The use of some of the proposed additional funding to ensure that the island has a highly skilled and well-trained workforce, who are valued for the important work they do in caring for some of our most vulnerable children.

We recognise that investment in the residential estate is only one part of the overall Children's Services Improvement Plan. We strongly welcome the continued recognition and commitment within that plan to increasing fostering and adoption capacity on the island.

2. As part of the Minister for Education's portfolio, the two areas of revenue expenditure growth are identified (see page 18 of the Annex for further details) as:

a. The provision of 15 hours of term-time funding for 2-3 year olds nursery places;

Extending funding to 2-3 year olds is very much to be welcomed and the Office sees this a strong step towards improving early years provision for all pre-school aged children and supporting families of young children. Research consistently shows the value of high-quality early years education and care, both for children's cognitive, social and emotional development and for supporting parental employment/income.

The early years are also a key stage for reducing inequalities, so this commitment means more children will have access to nursery places, which can help level the playing field in access to quality and affordable services, particularly for children from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

As such, the OCCJ views this as a welcome measure that has the potential to make a real difference for young children and their families in Jersey. The key will be in ensuring that funding is matched by safe, high-quality nursery places, a sufficient and trained workforce, adequate supply of places and staff, and clear data on impact.

b. Investment in Teachers Terms and Conditions, in order to increase planning, preparation and assessment time.

The OCCJ views the proposed investment in teacher's terms and conditions as strategically important. Ensuring that Jersey can attract high-quality, experienced, qualified teachers that are properly supported, properly remunerated, and retained is a fundamental part of providing quality education for all children. By investing in the teaching workforce, the Government is helping lay the foundation for improved educational outcomes, which in turn have lifelong implications for children's life chances.

Investment in the specialist workforce which supports children with a range of additional or complex needs must be a critical pillar in the T&Cs review to ensure equity. As such the OCCJ would welcome clarity as to whether the proposed funding is seen as residing within a broader workforce strategy that includes specialist teachers, early years practitioners, schools support staff, and inclusion/specialist staff, that emphasises children's outcomes and reducing educational inequalities within the system.

Questions from the Corporate Services Scrutiny Panel:

3. How will the Proposed Budget 2026-2029 allocations impact your organisation, including any impacts on service delivery?

As per the current Budget 2026 figures, the Office will be required to make a saving of £61,000 which, when added to the savings over the previous two budgets, represents a reduction of £139,000 in three years. When operating on a small budget, this level of cuts is significant and impacts on our ability to fulfil our statutory functions and add value to children and young people's lives through influencing positive legal, social and cultural change.

Although the Government expectation is that this further saving will be achieved through role reductions, the majority of this saving will have to be made in non-staff areas. Having already surrendered one FTE from a total staffing of nine, the OCCJ does not believe that it is appropriate, proportionate or efficient to be asked to lose one more FTE in 2026 (the equivalent of the value for money savings requested), particularly having recently gone through a restructure process, which saw the current structure agreed in January 2025.

In meeting the value for money savings required in the proposed 2026 budget, this will effectively restrict the OCCJ's capacity to do the job that it was established to do and require it to be administered on a very tight, almost shoestring budget, of an estimated non-staff budget of £208,000. Fundamental operations charges, such as rent, service charges, utilities and IT support services alone will account for almost half of this. While the remainder will cover the cost of some of our core work, such a World Children's Day event, website maintenance, maintaining our work at the UK and at an international level, servicing the required advisory panels etc., it will still require us to make difficult decisions about the extent and nature of the work we are able to undertake.

While the use of consultants is frequently referred to in budget as something that needs to be limited, it remains that the human rights expertise in Jersey is not well developed and the use of external, off-island consultants is necessary the small staff team cannot be expected to experts in every area of children's lives from early years to youth justice nor to be legally trained. These commissioned services frequently provide the expertise and information on which Commissioner's offices often rely to provide robust advice to Government as well as individuals who approach us for advice and information. Within the context of the current budget, our capacity to engage in such work will be severely curtailed.

As the OCCJ is unlikely to be able to contract external review or research work or to take legal advice or action where necessary and appropriate without securing additional funds from the Government, it is also a threat to our independence. This is a fundamental principle of all Commissioner's offices and, once tarnished or fettered, it creates long-term reputational and operational damage. Having established the OCCJ, it would now be, in our view, a regressive step to undermine the trust in this office that we have worked hard to build over the past six years for the want of a relatively small amount of money. These are concerns that the OCCJ has raised with our Accounting Officer, individual Ministers and the Council of Ministers.

4. Have discussions taken place with Government about the functions of your organisation, and whether there is scope for these to be merged with other arm's length organisations and entities?

To date no formal conversations have taken place with the OCCJ, during the time of the current Commissioner, about the merging of our functions with other arm's length organisations and entities.

From the perspective of children's human rights and independent oversight, the OCCJ is of the view that maintaining an independent, stand-alone Commissioner function is important. Merging with other bodies risks diluting the dedicated focus on children's rights or creating uncertainty as to the role and function of the Office. Many other arms-length bodies play a regulatory or inspection role. The OCCJ is neither of those things – it holds a unique role within the Island as the only independent human rights institution, and it is imperative that that its functions and powers not confused or diluted for purely cost-saving purposes.

The current arrangement between the OCCJ the Government in the use of back-office functions is currently deemed to be the most cost-effective of way accessing those administrative functions whilst preserving the independence and unique remit of the office as a human rights institution.

5. Overall, are you confident that you can maintain core service delivery with the allocations provided for in the Proposed Budget 2026-2029?

If the ambition of the States of Jersey is to provide the minimum in respect of the offices role and functions in achieving children and young people's human rights, then based on the proposed budget for 2026 the OCCJ is confident that it can provide this level of core services. However, it is the view of the OCCJ that is an unambitious aim for a jurisdiction to have in terms of both its Children's Commissioner and human rights.

General questions:

6. How effectively do you think the proposed Budget addresses the key priorities for children and young people?

While appearing simple, this question is in fact extremely difficult to answer, as the budget does not clearly separate proposed expenditure on children. While the budget for Children's Services and Education can be extracted, other services such as the expenditure on children's health services as part of the overall budget for the Department of Health is not identifiable from the material provided. In addition, the OCCJ is aware and concerned that not all Government plans and strategies either focussed on or including children are funded. A clear example of this is the Youth Justice Roadmap. Consequently, not all priorities as identified by the government itself are reflected in the budget.

Additionally, the Committee has not identified whose priorities for children and young people are to be considered here. If this is referring to those priorities set out in the Children and Young People's Plan (Children Young People and Families' Plan 2024-27.pdf), called outcomes in that plan, and the workstreams identified therein, there is insufficient detail in the budget to determine its efficacy in ensuring these outcomes for all children.

If the Committee is instead referring here to children and young people's priorities, as there is no specific consultation with them with regard to the budget, it is impossible to say whether this addresses their priorities.

7. Savings proposals (page 112): Do you have any comments on these?

The OCCJ has no comment on these.

8. Do you think anything further could be done to make the Government Budget more child-centred?

It is the view of the OCCJ that there is substantial scope to make Jersey's budget more explicitly child-centred. This could be achieved in the following ways:

- a) Undertake a Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) – The OCCJ recognise that there is no requirement for a CRIA to be undertaken on the budget. However, given the extent to which the budget directly and indirectly affects children, undertaking a CRIA on parts, if not all of the budget, would be beneficial. For example, the Government might choose the priorities set out in the Children and Young People's Plan and conduct a CRIA of the impact of the budget on achieving these.
- b) Introduce a child-centred budget statement – the Budget should include a section that aggregates all spending relevant to children across departments, showing total investment in children and young people, outcomes expected, and year-on-year changes.
- c) Ensuring children' participation in the budget process – ensure that children and young people are meaningfully engaged and consulted annually on budget priorities and have an opportunity to influence the process, not merely be informed of the decisions that have already been made.
- d) Communicate in an age-appropriate way – make the Budget accessible to young audiences through summary versions or infographics that show how public money supports children's services. We recognise the Government has produced a 'youth friendly' version of the budget for the last few years and we would be interested to learn what feedback the Government has sought from children and young people to ascertain whether the content and format has improved their knowledge and understanding of the budget.

By embedding these mechanisms, the OCCJ is of the opinion that the Government could move from being 'child-aware' to genuinely child-centred in its financial planning.

9. Does the Budget address the needs and rights of children from all different types of families?

The Budget does not provide sufficient detail for us to provide a robust answer to this question. Again, a dedicated statement within the budget that sets out all spending relevant to children across departments, ideally indirectly as well as directly, would be welcome. This coupled with a further breakdown and analysis on the proposed measures affect different groups of children and family structures, such as single-parent households, families with disabled children, children in care, migrant families, or families experiencing poverty, would enable better understanding as to whether the rights and needs of all different family types are being addressed.