

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
15TH NOVEMBER 2011

7.15 – 10.15pm

PRESENT: Councillor Jeff Hanna (Chair), Councillor James Holmes (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Agatha Akyigyina, Laxmi Attawar, Iain Dysart, Karin Forbes, Richard Hilton, Dennis Pearce, Linda Scott, Simon Withey

Co-opted members: Andrew Boxall, Amanda Stuart Fisher, Alison Jerrard

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Maxi Martin, Mark Allison

Officers: Caroline Holland, Yvette Stanley, Paul Ballatt, Melissa Caslake, Jan Martin, Michael Sutherland, Hilary Gullen,

1 Declarations of interest

None

2 Apologies for absence were received from: Keran Currie

3 Minutes of the Meeting held on a) 15th September 2011 (Special meeting) and b) 21st September 2011

Minutes agreed for both meetings

4 Matters arising from the minutes

In response to a panel member's question from the last meeting, Michael Sutherland advised panel that the number of new statements issued in year – overall 2010-2011 financial year was 116.

Order for agenda

Following a proposal by the Chair, and discussion and vote by the panel, it was agreed to take the Budget item (6) next, to be followed by the Safeguarding item.

6 Budget and Budget Options 2012-2016

Caroline Holland introduced the budget and budget options.

Members were asked to be explicit in raising queries/making comments as to which options they wish to refer to the Commission. Any items which do not have comments going to the Commission thereby will be taken as agreed.

A panel member expressed concern about the lack of detail given overall and how this made it difficult to make judgements.

Yvette Stanley explained how this fundamental review had taken place and that the department's nine service areas had been looked into separately. It had been an in-depth challenge, including examining which services could be provided in-house and which out-sourced. One big issue was the growing demographic as well as looking

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at changes in legislation and statutory requirements.

Yvette explained to panel that savings were ranked into three levels: level 1 represented efficiencies with no impact on clients or services; level 2 represented some impact and were more challenging to deliver and level 3 would involve a service reduction and introduced higher levels of risk and more significant service impacts. Equality impact assessments had also been carried out, which were brought to panel members' attention; these included more details on risks to vulnerable groups and how they could be mitigated.

Early Years (page 27): This area was introduced by Jan Martin who explained to panel that level 1 proposals involved bringing some work in-house and introducing some charging. Level 2 involved restructuring of the internal team, but without needing to make any redundancies. It was noted that the level 3 proposal was not currently supported by Cabinet.

A panel member queried whether there would be further 'backroom' cuts in the future. Yvette Stanley responded that the required savings levels had not yet been reached and therefore officers could not guarantee that more budget proposals would not be asked of them in the future.

Jan reassured a panel member that the proposal regarding the Acacia Centre was not being pursued at present. Paul Ballatt gave the background to the processes involved in developing this proposal – looking at the current level of funding for it and to sustain it through other means of delivery, looking at community provision, generating income to cross subsidise services etc. An 'expression of interest' document would then be put together to gauge market interest. Paul explained that the team was looking at the whole future of Children's Centres, but this was dependent on the future level of Early Intervention Grant funding. Yvette thought this proposal might be ready for consideration for years 2 and 3, once future grant funding was more certain.

In response to panel members' questions, Jan informed the meeting that the level 2 saving of increasing fees at Lavender Children's Centre was in line with previous increases, that the number of posts involved in the restructuring of the internal teams would be 3 or 4 posts out of 100, and that they were already managing without these positions being filled. Jan confirmed that the level 2 proposals on pages 28 and 29 were supported by partners, the health authority were acutely aware of the proposals.

Children, Schools and Families Children's Social Care (page 30): This area was

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introduced by Melissa Caslake.

A panel member expressed concern regarding Fostering and Adoption Panel expenses (level 1 item 2 page 31) and asked that the team speak to Fostering and Adoption Panel members again to ensure there will be no adverse impact on the children concerned. Panel members felt the proposals detailed on pages 233 and 234 represented 'short term gain for long term pain' and were going to reduce support for already disadvantaged people, ie the Breakfast Clubs.

Page 234, point 4 – A panel member felt that families who have already adopted need all the help they can get, and a reduction in support might put off prospective adopting parents.

Page 234, point 6 – A panel member expressed concern about this proposal in the light of the recent Ofsted report. Melissa Caslake responded that the team's parenting assessments usually have a good reception by the courts, who will not accept work unless it is of sufficient quality. The team would still need to buy in specialist expertise such as psychiatric assessments. However, the team was confident in being able to do parenting capacity reports, especially when this involves members of the extended family.

Page 234, point 7 – This proposal would have a detrimental effect on support available to vulnerable young people at a critical point in their lives. One panel member asked whether a loan could be arranged for the young person, or for travel expenses for interviews to be repaid by an employer where they employed the young person. Melissa agreed to look into this, although noted that teenagers were not generally known to be keen on paying money back. A panel member suggested that some funds for young people might be available from the Benefits Agency. Melissa said this had not been looked into yet, but one way to do this might be to encourage young people to access this themselves. The team is keen to give young people the skills to manage their own money.

Page 234, point 8 – A panel member raised a concern about the funding for children to be visited by their birth parents. Melissa responded that this was provided at a higher cost than necessary, for example, by the use of taxis. The level of contact was to be reviewed to make sure it is right for the child, particular for those in long term foster care.

Yvette Stanley explained how difficult it was to find significant savings required from the children's social care budget without impacting on vulnerable clients due to the

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nature of the service.. It was a matter of looking for the least unpalatable options.

Panel expressed concern about all the savings proposals listed on page 234 and particularly request that the Commission note this.

Children, Schools and Families School Standards and Quality (page 37) – this item was introduced by Jan Martin.

In response to a Panel member's comments that there was insufficient detail for these proposals to be properly considered, Jan offered to bring more detail to the meeting in January.

Alison Jerrard confirmed that schools were working on developing expertise in school to school support, and this was having a beneficial effect on staff.

Commission to be alerted to the lack of detail for this area of proposals.

Children, Schools and Families SEND Integrated Service (page 40) – Jan Martin introduced this item.

Jan was confident the deletion of the post as described for level 1 on page 41 could be done without affecting the service offered.

For the level 3 proposal, Jan explained there was no certainty about the budget as there might be changes from the current green/white paper.

Children, Schools and Families, Contracts, Procurement and School Organisation (page 43) – this item was introduced by Paul Ballatt.

Panel Members expressed concern regarding the proposed deletion of an admissions officer post due to the expected high workload of admissions in the coming years and the fact that the team was already very small. Concern was also expressed over the joint working with L B Sutton for admissions, and how the benefits from staff savings were to be allocated between the boroughs.

Paul Ballatt responded that other means of applying for school places were to be looked into, and that these would be expected to reduce officer workload. Paul pointed out to panel members that provision of school places and applying for school places were separate issues. Admissions officers were responsible for the allocation

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of available places.

A panel member also queried the impact of the proposed savings on Service Level Agreements and how schools manage these. It was agreed that there would be likely to be more SLAs, but not all contracts needed close monitoring and professional judgement was used as to which needed particular monitoring.

Concern was also expressed over the proposed capitalisation of some capital project management costs, and whether this constitutes a real saving.

Commission to be alerted to concern over L1 and L2 (page 44).

Children, Schools and Families, Youth Inclusion (page 46) – this item was introduced by Melissa Caslake.

A Panel member expressed serious concern on all cuts proposed in this section, particularly the Duke of Edinburgh Award, which should be seen as a level 3 (not level 1) saving. This is in context of the youths rioting in the summer, and how the lack of youth provision might increase unrest. These schemes are also important to give young people skills that will help them with employment and in being good citizens. Schemes for young people have a particular importance for those in the less affluent areas of the borough. The current economic situation also means that these schemes have added significance.

Commission to be advised that panel have most serious concerns regarding points 1, 4, 5 and 8 on page 260.

Commissioning Function and Commissioning Budgets (page 52) – Paul Ballatt introduced this item.

Panel welcomed savings proposals gained through improved procurement processes, although with some reservations about the level 3 proposal and its impact on vulnerable people.

Panel were reassured that all contracts held by the department had break clauses, with three months notice. Most would be ending as the three-year cycle was due.

Policy, Planning and Performance (page 56) – this item was introduced by Paul Ballatt

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A panel member raised a query about how reporting was carried out and how many non-statutory reports were really needed.

Paul Ballatt responded that any reduced requirement for reporting to government was yet to take shape, but that now, more than ever, there was a need to check efficiency and to ensure internal managers had the information they needed. He noted the team had already been reduced by 40%. To reduce internal reporting would jeopardise efficient operational management.

Panel agreed the level 1 saving on page 56.

SEN Transport (page 58) – this item was introduced by Paul Ballatt

Paul explained that the team were looking at raising the threshold for accepting young people for SEN transport, and that those in receipt of higher level mobility allowance might be disqualified in the future if the proposed changes to the SEN transport policy are accepted legally and politically. They were also looking at transforming the way the service is provided, which currently involves buses for groups and individuals in taxis. The options being considered included car sharing, volunteers and encouraging independent travelling.

A panel member expressed concern that reducing the availability of SEN transport, and encouraging other means of transport for vulnerable young people could involve risk, which was not acceptable. However, the involvement of any volunteers was to be welcomed. There was also confusion regarding the out-turn for 2010/2011 which had underspent by £150,000. If the proposed saving was for an equivalent amount, it would have no impact on the service, although panel noted that demographic changes may have already offset this for 2011/12.

Caroline Holland pointed out that as the school year runs from September, figures for those taking up SEN transport places were liable to change significantly in the autumn and therefore officers were in the process of revising predictions.

A panel member pointed out that those in receipt of higher-level mobility allowance would have been assessed as requiring this additional help, and that to remove transport provision would cause difficulties for them. There was also the possibility of judicial review if the council was seen to fail to meet statutory obligations.

Paul Ballatt reassured members that young people would not be put at risk by being expected to use public transport alone unless they had been trained and were

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confident about it. However, it is better for young people to learn to travel independently where possible.

Resolved: Panel asked for the latest out-turn forecast to be available for the January meeting.

Panel agreed to take item 9 next.

9 Update on the areas of development identified by the December Ofsted visit and November peer review

Melissa Caslake introduced this report.

Pages 55-57 constituted the bulk of the inspection letter, following the two day inspection. There were three areas of strength and no priority areas for action, and therefore on balance a positive report with improvements since the previous inspection report. The summary was reasonable, with areas for development consistent with those given to other local authorities.

Progress had been made on the Action Plan.

In response to panel members' questions Melissa explained that locum staff had become permanent members of the team, and that the management team were now almost complete. There were robust recruitment criteria and the latest drive had had a very good response.

Supervision records were used as a means of communication between a social worker and their manager, and gave a record of tasks and timescales and overview of care and planning. Audits were specific, discrete items of work which looked at the quality of a carefile overall.

Improved management decision making showed that greater detail of guidance to the social worker was required, with more decision detail and more detailed instructions.

Panel noted the good news regarding the work of the Supporting Families team being mentioned in the Munro Report and is a finalist in the Children and Young People Now Awards for preventative services 2011.

Yvette Stanley spoke of the work being done to share information between local

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authorities, to give better data sets to inform commissioning strategies. The use of 'smart' data could, for example, help give information about health in the locality of a particular children's centre.

There was discussion over the figures given for adoption. Melissa described how although the adoption rates for Merton had been low, this should be viewed in conjunction with Merton's figures for issuing Special Guardianship Orders, which were preferred where members of the extended family took over care for a child, particularly within some minority ethnic groups.

Yvette Stanley felt there might be some 'London factor' influencing the adoption figures, such as problems with the family courts in London which hold up the process and welcomed the government's initiative to streamline the court's process.

There are currently 12 children for adoption aged from birth to 3 years. There are 137 children in care in Merton in total although the majority would normally only be care for a short period of time.

A Panel Member asked for clarity on terms used in the report, for example, Peer Auditing and how assessments were signed off.

Melissa responded that peer auditing includes every layer of management. Information is collated and shared, seeking ways to improve. A quarterly report is given on any emerging themes. Front line social workers are given the opportunity to reflect on practice. Having a stable situation with recruitment and retention has helped, and they have introduced a management development programme. This helps staff to work more efficiently. Where there is a particularly good assessment, the practitioner is invited to share this during the team meeting. Overall, this helps the team work together more effectively.

Melissa confirmed the appendices to the report are updated every couple of months and that updates will be brought to panel in the spring. By this time it is expected that the ten day inspection will have taken place, and panel will be able to hear the results on this.

Cllr Martin thanked the team for their total dedication and the swift improvements brought about by management action.

Resolved: Updated adoption figures to come to panel in April.

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Panel rejected the option to extend the meeting to cover the remaining agenda items.

Resolved: to carry over the following agenda item to the January panel meeting: item 10 Safeguarding. This will be in conjunction with the following regular items - item 5: Update on Developments Affecting the Children, Schools and Families Department, item 7: Performance Monitoring, item 8: Work Programme