

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL  
25 JANUARY 2024

(7.15 pm - 10.00 pm)

PRESENT Councillors Councillor Usaama Kaweesa (in the Chair),  
Councillor Chessie Flack, Councillor Max Austin,  
Councillor Michael Butcher, Councillor Jil Hall,  
Councillor Billy Hayes, Councillor Linda Kirby,  
Councillor Samantha MacArthur and Councillor James Williscroft

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Charles and Marakie Tiluhan

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

The minutes of the meeting of 27 November 2023 were agreed.

4 MERTON SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP - ANNUAL  
REPORT (Agenda Item 4)

The Team Manager Policy and Partnerships introduced the report. In response to questions it was confirmed that:

- Training programmes in February and March would give practitioners information from the young scrutineers to their areas
- The conference in March will also be focused on inequalities.
- Youth Crime Executive Board has a sub group which looks at disproportionality.
- The Multi-agency toolkit and training offer seeks to address identifying issues around neglect, feedback is regularly sought and work is ongoing to refine.
- Feedback suggests that it is being used and well received.
- Important to consider the overall number of children receiving attention, changes in figures in one area can correlate to a change in figures elsewhere as cases move through the system.
- Our figures are commensurate with other local authorities

- Quality assurance work is an ongoing exercise to ensure that children are safe and looked after.
- Every month the senior leadership looks at the figures and the cases and examines the details to ensure that thresholds and action are where they should be.
- Can come back to committee with extra information around Clares Law cases.

Members requested that future papers for scrutiny panel consider the volume of children across the Borough where English is a second language where relevant.

Chair was grateful for a well presented report with useful infographics, good updates and pleasing to see numbers of multi agency delegates receiving training and the cooperating between adult safeguarding and childrens' boards to collaborate where appropriate.

## 5 BUDGET/BUSINESS PLAN (Agenda Item 5)

Agenda items 5 and 6 were considered together.

The Cabinet Member introduced the report and thanked the Chief Executive, Executive Directors and Officers who worked hard to analyse the detail in the settlement and prepared papers for Cabinet and Scrutiny.

There is provision for some extra funding for social care, but it does not go as far as was hoped. The settlement indicates we will receive £20million less than in 2010, the burden passes onto Council Tax payers.

Further investment coming to the services outlined in the cabinet papers, however not much change to areas of concern to this committee.

Executive Directors noted that this is an update since November which includes updated assumptions around inflation, pay and grants. Pressures in social care and housing still exist, we are not alone, other boroughs are also affected.

Final settlement will come in the next week or ten days, the pressures are challenging, funding has not matched changes in service and demand over recent years.

It's the fifth year in a row of receiving a 1 year settlement, which makes longer term planning more challenging.

In response to questions it was confirmed that:

- Govt figures suggesting 5.8% increase in core spending power assumes that the full power to increase council tax will be taken advantage of.
- An announcement in late December around funding followed by an update in January made the budgeting environment very challenging
- Placement spend is 24% below average per child, recent assessment by Grant Thornton shown that we have a cost effective system in place. Work is ongoing to assess ability to provide more care within the borough,
- Also looking at providing semi-independent accommodation for children leaving care.
- Highest cost is £29k per week for one child, in secure placement. \$8k per week is normal for an average placement.
- Local foster carers is more cost effective than using agencies, which in turn are more cost effective than children's homes.
- Looking at ways to use dynamic purchasing to reduce SEN transportation costs, through travel training, and other initiatives.
- It won't take two years to do the feasibility study, but will need some expert advice to help follow up the recommended work from that study. Will be looking at existing building stock, but will put in a capital bid at the appropriate time, but expect as a long term spend to save, such a bid would be well received.
- Local response to cost of living includes providing saving accounts to y7 pupils in the borough through Croydonplus Credit Union along with lessons in school around money management.
- The social care grant is ring fenced for children and adults but does not specify the proportions. No reduction in overall funding.
- Most of what can be seen in family hubs is different services coming into one place, the services will continue, though transformation funding will cease.
- Capital spend projects may take place over a longer period of time or in the future. Members can scrutinise each of these projects, if requested, but the budget report does not go into high detail on each project. Members can also seek briefing from Executive Directors. The Commission will also look at the details.
- We are working hard to ensure that early years provision can continue, some savings will come from an increase in grants, but nevertheless ambition is to ensure provision meets requirements.

## 6 BUDGET/BUSINESS PLAN - LATEST CABINET PAPER (Agenda Item 6)

Covered in previous item.

## 7 CHILDHOOD IMMUNISATIONS (Agenda Item 7)

The Lead Nurse Consultant introduced the report, highlighting that Merton has an immunisation uptake below the SW London average, but we do have a highly mobile population. Uptake in the north of the borough is particularly below the average. However, uptake on MMR vaccination is above SW London average. A dip in Q2 is normal and expected to pick up in Q3 and 4. Work is underway to ensure that practises have sufficient stocks of both kinds of MMR vaccine, and posters to advertise the need to immunise.

In response to questions it was confirmed that:

- Work is underway to ensure advertising around vaccinations and immunisation is accessible to as many people as possible and recommendations from members are welcome.
- Commission and delivery of childhood vaccinations sits with NHS, mainly in primary care, Public Health provide oversight and support, home visiting and school nursing.
- Communications are targeted both geographically as well socio-economically and ethnically and focusing on areas with low uptake of immunisations.
- There is a trend for not immunising children, the alleged link between MMR and autism has been disproven, but it's easier to come across and latch onto negative views. It is challenging to work against misinformation, which has an impact. Staff are trained to answer difficult questions.
- Data from CHIS is a snapshot and the figures allow for a variance, the immunisation targets are set by WHO, by hitting these targets the illnesses become unable to circulate.
- If we have not been informed of a change of address, former residents can remain registered with a Merton GP for up to a year and this can skew the data for the area. We can though show that trends are upwards.
- Immunisation data stays with the child, so when they move areas/GPs the data goes with them through the CHIS system.
- In the London wide Measles and Polio campaign, phase 2 identified 200000 children missed and follow-up work is targeting this group but only 2000 attended and around 80% are completely unvaccinated, this is a trend in the region and across England.
- Lots of training around vaccine confidence and engaging residents through youtube, faith leaders, working in different languages, local tv and schools.
- We do share best practice across the country.
- If residents come from abroad without records we can access country records and estimate what would have been received, can also reimmunise, which is safe.
- If someone does not want to share records, they don't have to, it doesn't have to go on the system and can be coded in a way that limits access to information.

- The percentages of immunisation can be a blunt measure, and when you examine the data specifically can allow healthcare providers to target their work specifically to capture more people and work is ongoing to identify the missing 15% and using the data shows where the focus needs to be.
- Students are targeted during Freshers weeks and encouraged to register with local GP to fill the gaps in their vaccination records.
- Some students don't register with a local GP, but if they get in touch they will be encouraged to do so and given the advice they need.
- Whatever issue they visit for, Drs are alerted to their vaccination status and encourage them to get MMR, ACWY and HPV vaccines.
- Not dismissive of the percentages/data, policies are evergreen and work will continue until the percentages improve.

## 8 LOCAL PLAYGROUNDS (Agenda Item 8)

Chair thanked the department for a detailed report.

The Cabinet Member and Head of Parks introduced the report. £2mill set aside for play parks over the next few years, work underway to upgrade parks, starting with those of greatest need. Designs take into account feedback from local communities. Councillors are welcome to contact the Parks team with questions and suggestions relating to facilities in their wards.

In response to questions it was confirmed that

- Play manufactures aware of over reliance on particular materials, so we do look at alternative options, that also fit with the environment. They do sometimes have metal underground, but all timber is FSC approved, Where plastics are used, they are recycled, which is more durable, and long lasting
- Capital for Wimbledon Park is an investment in the infrastructure, the splash pad rather than the pool, the upgrade is linked into the legionella testing, which will extend the life of the feature. £150k ringfenced for the improvement to the play infrastructure, £87 for making it compliant with legionella testing. Worked with S106 officer on that work.
- Not quite completed works, so communications will begin after March when they reopen. Green spaces strategy will cooperate with a group call Safe Spaces for Girls, Surveys show that young people like our parks, we need to maintain that.
- We don't have statistics on usage, but that is something that can look at doing.

- Willing to engage with other groups to promote the park spaces and the improvements.

IS the water feature a new element, or just maintenance on existing

Thanks given to the Parks team for their work.

## 9 DEPARTMENTAL UPDATE (Agenda Item 9)

The Executive Director introduced the report noting the Joint Target Area Inspection, which included inspectors from 4 organisations including CQC and OFSTED and took place over three weeks, with 12 inspectors on site in the third week.

The inspectors noted Merton had strong partnerships, recognised the strength of working participation and Childrens Voices. There were also areas to improve.

The report does not apply a 'grade', but will outline areas of strength and for development, and expected to produce and action plan for those. The final letter will be published on 12 February and will be included in the departmental update in March.

In response to questions

- The council is committed to retaining school improvement function, maintained schools have access to MEPs, there's no plan to reduce that resource
- Schools delegate money from schools grant, to support school in difficult circumstances and support schools with falling rolls.
- We're not increasing the budget but we're not losing it, and continue to work closely with schools.
- No plans for closure of schools, a nearby school which is closing is an academy, not a maintained school and it does have very low numbers.
- Headteachers meet in clusters and we do try to manage admission numbers across those schools, so that all don't choose to reduce class volumes at the same time.
- Intake numbers and long term plans should not be a surprise to Governors, would expect them to flag to us that a school may be becoming unsustainable.

## 10 PERFORMANCE MONITORING (Agenda Item 10)

The committee noted the contents of the report.

## 11 YOUTH TASK GROUP - REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS (Agenda Item 11)

The Chair of the TaskGroup introduced the report , highlighting that bigger pools of philanthropic funding have thresholds that we don't quite meet. The consequence of that is that the third sector working in the borough doesn't have access to the same resources as large organisations.

The smaller charities can effectively form a consortium giving access to larger funds and then divide the money appropriately amongst themselves.

YPF is the direction of travel, regardless of the views of the council. So the report sets out four recommendations on how it might be implemented and how it can work with council and the councillors.

The Panel agreed the recommendations

The Chair thanked the Task Group for their work.

## 12 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 12)

3 updates

Task group focused on how effective the council is at engaging young people in local democracy and political activities, likely to be rolled over to the next scrutiny year.

This can form part of topic selection at the next meeting.

Will also be seeking feedback on the functioning of the panel from interested parties.

Next meeting 11 March.