

Agenda Item 3

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CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 4 NOVEMBER 2020

(7.15 pm - 8.54 pm)

PRESENT: Councillors Councillor Brenda Fraser (in the Chair),
Councillor Hayley Ormrod, Councillor Agatha Mary Akyigyina,
Councillor Omar Bush, Councillor Edward Foley,
Councillor Joan Henry, Councillor James Holmes,
Councillor Russell Makin, Councillor Marsie Skeete,
Councillor Dave Ward and Mansoor Ahmad

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Eleanor Stringer (Cabinet Member for Children and Education)

Rachael Wardell (Director, Children, Schools & Families Department) and Karl Mittelstadt (Head of Policy, Performance and Partnerships) Stella Akintan (Scrutiny Officer)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

There were no apologies for absence.

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

Mansoor Ahmed was present at last meeting and this was not recorded in the minutes. The Panel agreed the remainder of the minute as a true and accurate record

4 BUSINESS PLAN 2020-2022 (Agenda Item 8)

The Director of Corporate Services gave an update on the current budget position. The budget gap was originally £3.3 million rising to £11.2 million in 2024-25 but has been revised to £16.7 million rising to £19.7 million over the same period. The main assumptions in pay and inflation have been reviewed and updated. The Spending Review will be for one year in late November, the local government settlement will be announced week commencing 14th December. These timescales make it difficult to plan and budget appropriately. The Business Rates Reset and Retention Scheme has been deferred and there are question if this is suitable funding for local authorities.

Covid has had a significant impact on the budget, income on parking, leisure and other sources have been threatened. There is a challenge to achieve some savings

either because staff have been deployed elsewhere or savings not appropriate to implement during the pandemic.

Some savings proposals will go to cabinet on the 9th November and the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on the 11th November. All available savings proposals will be collated into the budget pack and will be dispatched at the end of December as in previous years.

A panel member queried whether the monitoring reports includes details on the funding received from the government which amounts to almost 15m and the additional monies for the second wave of Covid. Also if the Children Schools and Families £2 million outturn for non-Covid savings, would have resulted in £3 million if the department had made the forecast savings.

The Director of Corporate Services reported that it included grants of almost £15 million and the most recent monitoring reports includes further details of government grants. There are savings of £2.9 million within Children Schools and Families department. The shortfall is currently forecast as £734,000 and is factored into outturn position of a favourable variance of £1.229 million.

A panel member asked if the Director of Corporate Services if her Department is reviewing opportunities for further funding from grants and other sources including the council charging for services even on a temporary basis to support financial recovery

The Director of Corporate Services said they are maximising opportunities received from a range of grants including homelessness, rough sleeping and climate change emergency. The loss of income is unprecedented but it is important to secure income that can be sustained.

A Panel Member asked for further detail of departmental base budget incremental increase over the next four years. The Director of Corporate Services said a breakdown is available and will be sent to panel members.

A Panel Member asked if the government will fund the costs of recovery. The Director of Corporate Services said money has been received for the vulnerable and business support. Some funding finishes at the end of this financial year and there is still a need to secure ongoing income.

RESOLVED

The Chair thanked the Director of Corporate Services for her report.

The Director of Corporate Services to provide the Panel with the breakdown of the departmental base budget.

5 IMPACT OF COVID-19 - VERBAL UPDATE FROM THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES. (Agenda Item 4)

The Director of Children Schools and Families gave a verbal update on the impact of Covid, she reported that;

Despite the challenges, all Merton schools are open, although some bubbles and year groups had to close.

Attendance figures at schools have dipped which is typical for this time of year, they are working with Head teachers to keep this under review.

It was reported that there is increasing vulnerability in the under 5s. The Department are supplying personal protective equipment to social workers on visits and they are being asked to be more creative to maintain social distancing

A Panel member asked if the fall in school attendance is a cause for concern. The Director for Children Schools and Families said it is usual for sickness and absence to be higher at this time of year and the numbers are likely to revert to normal levels.

A Panel member asked how to reduce caseloads in the safeguarding service and what additional support is available for schools with positive Covid tests .The Director of Children Schools and Families reported that they may have to increase social work on a temporary basis and work has been spread across social work teams. In regards to positive Covid tests there are special arrangements and support from the public health team. The Department for Education provides advice and support. There is also support for schools to develop online platforms for pupils who have tested positive,

A Panel member asked about support for young people who attend youth centres, The Director of Children Schools and Families reported that support groups and online programmes are available for young people.

A panel member asked how we safeguard children on the way to school, The Director of Children Schools and Families said we need a community response to keep children from harm. In relation to a recent incident in the borough the statutory services had done their job.

A Panel member asked how schools will distinguish between flu and Covid. The Director of Children Schools and Families said symptoms are distinct, not overlapping with flu. A positive test result is the basis for self-isolation.

RESOLVED

The Chair thanked the Department for their hard work during this busy period

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Education thanked the council and local businesses for their support in providing free school meals to young people over the half term.

6 DEPARTMENT UPDATE REPORT (Agenda Item 5)

The Director of Children Schools and Families gave an overview of the work across the department;

A Panel member thanked the Director for the support to young people as the Unique Talent group were recently featured on the television

A panel member asked if there has been an increase in applications for free school meals, The Director of Children Schools and Families said there has been an increase in poverty in the community, increase of 1000 over Covid period, team managing workload. A panel member said given there more electronic devices available to schools is this an opportunity to use these to enhance learning. The Director of Children Schools and Families said there are in on-going discussions with schools about how the increased digital offer can be maximised.

A panel member said given the risks that had been identified in the 0-5 age group what additional parenting programmes are being planned and what was the level of oversubscription for the existing programmes. The Director of Children Schools and Families said this information would be supplied to panel members.

A panel member queried the progress with PFI contracts as schools in contract have expressed dissatisfaction in way they are delivered in maintenance, school meals and cleaning. The Director of Children Schools and Families said they are in discussion with providers and considering a range of options including step-in arrangements and taking back provision

A panel member asked how the fostering and adoption teams maintained services during the pandemic. The Director of Children Schools and Families reported that the service focussed on stability for young people but there were some placement moves after lockdown. The services are overseen by the Corporate Parenting Board and this Panel can receive the Annual Fostering Report and Annual Adoption report should they wish to.

RESOLVED

The Director of Children Schools and Families to provide the Panel with details on levels of subscription and future parenting programmes for the 0-5 age group.

The Panel to receive the Annual Fostering and Annual Adoption reports when they are published.

The Chair thanked Rachael Wardell for her work in the department and support to the Panel. The Chair highlighted that Rachael has been professional and dedicated, as a result the Service is in a good position.

Rachael said she enjoyed Merton as a place and community and thanked the Panel for challenge. Rachael said she also felt supported, with everyone working together to achieve the best for children and families.

7 PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT (Agenda Item 6)

The Head of Performance, Policy and Partnerships said the number of children on protection plans has increased during lockdown, Merton figures are lower than the England and London average. Figures in September were higher than average and further increased in October which is putting pressure on the service.

8 WORK PROGRAMME 2020-21 (Agenda Item 7)

Work programme

A panel member recognised the challenges of the last few months but highlighted the following items are due to appear on the agenda at future meetings:

- Full review on Educational Health and Care Plans
- Special Educational Needs Transport
- Foster care provision
- Care leaver apprenticeship schemes

RESOLVED

The Chair agreed to work with officers to develop the work programme.

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