

# Agenda Item 2

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## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

12 JANUARY 2022

(7.15 pm - 9.17 pm)

PRESENT: Councillors Councillor Sally Kenny (in the Chair),  
Councillor Hayley Ormrod, Councillor Stan Anderson,  
Councillor Omar Bush, Councillor Nick Draper,  
Councillor Edward Foley, Councillor Joan Henry,  
Councillor James Holmes, Councillor Russell Makin,  
Councillor Dennis Pearce, Mansoor Ahmad, Roz Cordner and  
Dr Stannard

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Tobin Byers and Eleanor Stringer

Stella Akintan (Scrutiny Officer), Elizabeth Fitzpatrick (Head of School Improvement), Caroline Holland (Director of Corporate Services), Jane McSherry (Director of Children, Schools and Families), Karl Mittelstadt (Head of Policy, Performance and Partnerships) and Dr Dagmar Zeuner (Director, Public Health)

### 1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Helena Dollimore, who joined the meeting online. Councillor Joan Henry attended as a substitute.

### 2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

There was no declarations of pecuniary interests

### 3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a true and accurate record.

### 4 COVID 19 UPDATE (Agenda Item 4)

The Director of Public Health said there had been significant changes since the agenda had been published. It was reported that:

The Infection rate is on a downward trajectory however this should be viewed cautiously as the start of the new school term may affect rates.

Hospitalisation has increased but there is a reduction in disease severity.

The NHS is under serious pressure and the message continues that vaccination is the best tool against the omicron variant and presentation of serious disease.

There was a focus on booster roll-out before Christmas and there was also an increase in uptake in 1st and 2nd vaccines.

There is now a more targeted approach to ensure all sections of the community access vaccination centres. Pop up sites and community venues are being used to support this initiative.

Some schools have volunteered their premises as hubs  
Children aged 5-11 at high risk will be eligible for a vaccine, this will be rolled out about April time.

Merton has been successful in being awarded funding of £485,000 to appoint vaccines champions.

In response to questions the Director of Public Health said we do not have a breakdown of vaccination by BAME background due to data protection rules, we do have a figures on the general population.

#### RESOLVED

The Chair thanked the Director of Public Health for her report.

#### 5 BUSINESS PLAN UPDATE 2022-2026 (Agenda Item 5)

The Director of Corporate Services gave an overview of the budget position and reported there will be further updates to cabinet next week. The Director of Children Schools and Families said the savings are very achievable.

A panel member asked for clarification on savings not achieved and an update on the safety valve intervention discussions.

The Director of Corporate Services said the impact of Covid meant some savings could not be delivered, departments were not required to find replacement savings. This process was reported at the last scrutiny meeting. Savings coming forward will be kept under review.

The Director of Children Schools and Families said they have completed the process of support and challenge for the proposed Safety Valve programme. This looked at proposals for a way forward, and the basic principals were agreed. The department is currently waiting for a response from the Secretary of State which will also set out how much money will be provided and the timetable for delivery of monies. The Director said they are also making an application for a capital bid.

A panel member asked if the current inflation assumption of 1.5% is realistic and how the Dedicated Schools Grant deficit will be managed considering that costs are still rising. The Director of Corporate Services said the inflation rate has been revised to 3.2% this will be kept under review, not all expenditure is subject to an inflation increase. The Director of Children Schools and Families said replacing actions are being put in place to balance in-year the second part to get rid of historical deficit through the council and the potential Safety Valve Project.

A panel member said 72% savings have not been met and although circumstances change it is important to meet savings once agreed. It was also asked if any potential monies from the safety valve project have been included in the budget.

The Director of Children Schools and Families said the monies will not appear in the budget until the application has been agreed.

The Cabinet Member for Finance said we have a medium term financial strategy that balances the budget but if the safety valve funding is available, it will be incorporated into the budget.

A panel member said Merton had a greater difficulty with the Special Educational Needs provision than other areas with a greater deficit and therefore should have understood the underlying issues at an earlier stage.

The Cabinet Member for Children and Education said this is a national challenge and Merton is an extreme case due to rising demand and lack of places. Significant additional investment was needed to address the challenge.

A panel member asked if the social workers in schools project will continue and if there is provision for it in the budget. The Director of Children Schools and Families said the money bid for as part a pilot programme and we will need to find monies to continue with it.

#### RESOLVED

The Chair thanked officers for their reports

6 SAVINGS INFORMATION PACK (Agenda Item 5a)

7 DEPARTMENTAL UPDATE - TO FOLLOW (Agenda Item 6)

The Director of Children Schools and gave an overview of the report and the position in schools.

A panel member congratulated officers on the good work taking place within the department. Officers were reminded that reports need to ensure they provide sufficient detail for effective scrutiny.

A request was made for more detail on the 'reflection within the department following the recent murders of young children'.

The Director of Children Schools and Families said the department had reviewed all virtual visits and the reasons for these to ensure robust management oversight of any virtual visits. Usual practice is for all visits to be in person except where there are exceptional circumstances so there are very few virtual visits. They had also stepped up children missing in education processes to review again all children not in school who were open to children social care as they had in the first lockdown and extended this review to all children open to the targeted early help team.

The Chair highlighted the importance of balance to ensure that the reports are not too long but contain the relevant detail

Panel members asked about waiting lists in secondary schools. The Director of Children Schools and Families said there were secondary places available in Merton but that they may not be in a school parents had stated a preference for. The Assistant Director of Education and Early Help said there had been higher preference for entry into year 7 in Merton schools this year so there were fewer spaces this year group.

#### RESOLVED

Future departmental updates to include:

- Details of waiting lists for secondary schools
- Update on the school places planning strategy looked at in September
- Feedback on the work of Youth Ambassadors following the schools conference on racism.
- Update on findings from the youth voice survey

#### 8 CABINET MEMBER PRIORITIES - VERBAL UPDATE (Agenda Item 7)

Youth voice – looked at this over last few months. The results of the survey have not been published yet but will feed in to the Merton 20-30 programme. Young people are also involved in other governance groups like the Corporate Parenting Board Schools - Ofsted inspections and place planning.

Children's social care – want to get more involved and ensure early help and social care is reviewed regularly in scrutiny

Special Educational Need and Disability – ensure we have a plan that is achievable and within cost and there is ongoing improvements in quality.

#### 9 PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT - TO FOLLOW (Agenda Item 8)

The Head of Performance Improvement and Partnerships gave an overview of the report

A panel member thanked officers for the report and the useful commentary on issues and how to address them

A panel member asked about how much control the council has over timescales for court proceedings. The Head of Performance, Improvement and Partnerships said in relation to indicator 16 we are reliant on court time processes and during the pandemic there has been a national increase in the time it takes to conclude family court proceedings due to court closures

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care said from a practice perspective indicator 16 timescales have been a challenge during the pandemic. The aim is to ensure only those cases where there is no alternatives go through the court system,

Merton has low cases going to court however this means the figures can become skewed with a small number of complex cases that can take an exceptionally long time.

A panel member asked if they could understand in relation to indicator 16 the number of cases as well as the average length of time over rather than percentages and also as over 26 weeks for these cases. The Head of Performance Improvement and Partnerships said he would look to see how he would provide this clarification.

**RESOLVED**

The Chair thanked officers for their report.

**10 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 9)**

The work programme was noted.

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