

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
3 NOVEMBER 2015

(19.15 - 21.15)

PRESENT Councillors Councillor Katy Neep (in the Chair),
Councillor Linda Taylor, Councillor Charlie Chirico,
Councillor Edward Foley, Councillor Joan Henry,
Councillor James Holmes, Councillor Marsie Skeete,
Councillor Dennis Pearce, Denis Popovs, Councillor Jeff Hanna
and Councillor Agatha Mary Akyigyina

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Maxi Martin (Cabinet Member for Children's Services),
Councillor Martin Whelton (Cabinet Member for Education)
Yvette Stanley (Director of Children, Schools and Families), Jane McSherry
(Assistant Director of Education), , Paul Ballatt (Assistant Director of
Commissioning, Strategy and Performance), Rebecca Redman (Scrutiny
Officer)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Martin Whelton and
Simon Bennett.

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

None.

3 BUDGET AND BUSINESS PLAN (ROUND 1) (Agenda Item 3)

Caroline Holland introduced the report. The report outlined the updated MTFS
up to 2019/20 and identified a budget gap of £15.3 million which is based on
current assumptions, ahead of the spending review which is expected in
December 2015.

The report also included alternative savings proposed by the CSF department.
The Capital programme also included, highlighted the costs related to
secondary school expansion.

Councillor James Holmes enquired if savings from previous years had been
realised. Caroline Holland confirmed this was the case.

Councillor Maxi Martin sought the views of the Panel and reiterated that difficult decisions had to be made to set a balanced budget.

Yvette Stanley added that £1.9 million of savings would need to be found within the CSF department. This was the lowest weighting in terms of other departments across the council in recognition of the focus on services for vulnerable people. Adult social care had similar protection but had a much bigger budget to call on so had a marginally higher percentage to find. The department receives a significant proportion of its budget from the dedicated schools grant and has comparatively low general fund from the council. The department have prioritised statutory duties and focused services on those most vulnerable/at risk in line with the department's target operating models.

Work has been on-going in the following areas to make savings:

- Education TOM) – work with schools to maximise income;
- Early Years TOM – rationalise work in localities; achieve higher income targets for paid for services and achieve income from increased working with public health;
- Youth Services – loss of 80% of budget therefore working with alternative providers and funding bodies;
- Children's social care – maintain focus of service on child protection, safeguarding prevention and our looked after an care leavers service and seeking to maintain as much preventative provision as possible within a diminishing resource base.

Councillor James Holmes asked what steps had been taken to review the possibility of outsourcing services and the associated savings that could be generated from this. Councillor James Holmes also asked if means testing or raising council tax had been explored. Councillor Maxi Martin responded that the administration had agreed to freeze council tax that means testing had not been looked into but could be if it was felt to be appropriate and outsourcing isn't always an option or necessarily going to secure the best outcomes for residents.

Yvette Stanley explained that Merton faces particular challenges in that it is the lowest funded authority in London and that the council work with the voluntary sector to get a better service/price and have commissioned a number of services from this sector. Some of the services that are already outsourced are:

- IT services;
- Project management of school buildings;
- School meals;
- Cleaning; and

- Preventative services from the VCS

Yvette Stanley added that some adoption services have the potential to be outsourced. With regard to means testing, it is difficult to collect small amounts of money from residents but some services are means tested in that they are based on eligibility, which includes income.

Khadiri from MVSC addressed the Panel to comment on the impact of the proposed savings on the voluntary sector. He explained that he understood the council's constraints and appreciated efforts to discuss the issues by the CSF department with the voluntary sector. He also expressed concerns that funding was being cut at the same time that children and young people's plan is being launched. The savings proposed run counter to the priorities within the revised Children and Young People's Plan.

Khadiri explained that, as council budgets and services provided were shrinking, there was a greater reliance and demand upon the voluntary sector. However, the voluntary sector is also facing similar cuts to its funding. The voluntary sector has little reserves to call upon at a time when they should be providing a safety net for residents. The MVSC will continue to work with the council.

The Panel thanked Khadiri for his contribution.

Councillor Katy Neep proposed to the Panel that they consider savings by theme:

Commissioning (alternative saving) – CSF 2014-05 (pg 26)

Commissioning – CSF 2015-04 (pg 61)

Paul Ballatt provided an outline of the saving and the potential impact. He added that the CSF department are working with organisations affected over the next 6 months that will no longer be commissioned by the council from April 2016 and gather information on the families they work with that will be impacted and the council will continue to deliver some specialist services. Advice will be provided to these organisations concerning accessing funding and grants.

Councillor Agatha Akyigyina noted that support to voluntary groups to secure funding was positive and asked how long this support would be offered. Paul Ballatt explained that letters would shortly be sent to organisations, followed up with offers of support for the remainder of the financial year.

Councillor James Holmes asked if we should commission more services from the voluntary sector due to the smaller overhead costs. Yvette Stanley explained that commissioning the local voluntary sector in Merton does not necessarily provide the economies of scale that would enable this to deliver savings. Larger providers working regionally or London wide can deliver larger

economies of scale. Hence London is exploring this for aspects of adoption and we already do so for SEN and LAC placements. Paul Ballatt explained that the commissioning team are helping the voluntary sector look at alternative sources of funding. Yvette Stanley added that it had identified that over 300 families that would be impacted by this saving. This is way officers had come back asking for less money to be taken out.

Commissioning – CSF2015 – 05/ CSF2015 – 06 (pgs 61/62)

Paul Ballatt outlined the savings proposed. The property and contracts team will be prioritising secondary school expansion going forward. There are fewer capital schemes to progress, therefore less project management is required.

The research and information team will be supporting an SEN review. Economies of scale will be realised in reviewing all outposted posts from within this service.

Councillor Dennis Pearce asked if all projects the team would carry out would be the most significant. Paul Ballatt explained that there was a mix of schemes and that a new secondary school is the largest project and many not be managed by the council.

RESOLVED: Panel agreed the saving.

Schools – CSF 2015-03 (pg 60)

Jane McSherry informed the Panel that the department were looking at other service that could be traded. Councillor Jeff Hanna noted the burden placed on schools budgets already. Jane McSherry explained that Merton Education Partnership and the Schools Forum are working with schools.

RESOLVED: Panel noted the saving.

Children’s Social Care – CSF 2015-01 (pg 27)

Yvette Stanley explained that there were a relatively low number of serious case reviews in Merton and the budget had been historically overstated. Learning and Improvement reviews are on-going. The CSF department have reviewed the MSCB has agreed that any future reviews will be jointly funded with the CCG.

There have been a number of changes within the department and a balance between commissioning and delivery has been sought.

RESOLVED:

Panel noted the saving.

Panel noted the report and did not wish to make any comments to the Commission for consideration.

4 MATTERS ARISING (Agenda Item)

Councillor Linda Taylor asked what work had been undertaken to promote apprenticeships, as discussed at the last meeting. Paul Ballatt confirmed that there are 28 current apprenticeships across the council. 2 of these are in CSF and one of which is in a school. There are another two apprenticeships in recruitment at present. A post 16 pathways task group update will be provided to the January 2016 meeting. Yvette Stanley added that the department focusses recruitment of apprenticeships on vulnerable young people - for example, looked after children, children on a child protection plan and those at risk of NEET status are being targeted. This information will be provided in the next update report in January 2016.

Councillor Katy Neep enquired about Free School Meals. Paul Ballatt explained that there had been a drive to increase the number of eligible children receiving free school meals, and the associated pupil premium income. However, with recent changes, a number are no longer eligible. Parents have allowed the council to determine their eligibility through the DfE system at central government level and in the region of 1000 new children became eligible in 2015-16. However, despite these efforts, a similar number has been removed from entitlement because of changes in their families' incomes.

Councillor Joan Henry asked if foster children were entitled to free school meals. Paul Ballatt explained that looked after children do not automatically qualify for FSM (although they do attract Pupil Premium). Eligibility was set nationally and could not be adjusted locally. The welfare changes however, are likely to increase the number of those eligible. There is also no national benchmarking data available in this area. The department will continue to encourage, register and target those that are eligible. Yvette Stanley added that traditionally parents in Merton have been reluctant to claim free school meals but the department continues to make this a priority.

Councillor Jeff Hanna enquired about the status of the letter on child tax credits that was agreed to be sent at the last meeting of the Panel. Councillor Katy Neep explained that this letter had been drafted and was subject to agreement by the conservative Members of the Panel and would be finalised that week.

Councillor Katy Neep proposed that the Panel have a discussion at their January 2016 meeting regarding how they can ensure they are scrutinising effectively and adding value to the work of the CSF department.

RESOLVED: Panel agreed to hold a discussion about the work programme and approach to scrutiny at their January 2016 meeting.

5 EXECUTIVE RESPONSE AND ACTION PLAN - ONLINE STRATEGIES IN SCHOOLS (Agenda Item 4)

Paul Ballatt introduced the report. He highlighted the action plan associated with the recommendations made by the online strategies task group that had been agreed by Cabinet at their September 2015 meeting. Paul Ballatt thanked the task group of raising the profile of this issue and explained that some initiatives and recommendations are being led/implemented by the school improvement team, school management and information service and the Merton Education Partnership.

RESOLVED:

- Panel requested an update on progress in 6 months time.
- Councillor Katy Neep agreed to be the Member Champion for the review.
- Panel noted the report.

6 PERFORMANCE REPORT (Agenda Item 5)

Yvette Stanley introduced the report and highlighted that the department were aiming to improve on quorate attendance at child protection meetings. There is also a need to ensure a smooth transition from health. There are also challenges with the council's IT system which mean that we have to supplement our reporting systems. The new management information system next year will assist with this. Paul Ballatt added that the department set themselves ambitious targets for foster care recruitment and have recruited more than all of the North West London Borough's combined.

RESOLVED: Panel noted the report.

7 SCOPING REPORT - TRANSFER OF PUBLIC HEALTH FUNCTIONS TO THE LA (TO BE TABLED) (Agenda Item 6)

RESOLVED: Panel agreed the scope and to appoint Members to the task group at a later date when the review would start in January 2015 noted the report.

8 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 7)

RESOLVED: Panel noted the work programme and agreed to reflect on the approach being taken to the work programme to ensure effective scrutiny at their January 2016 meeting.

