

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
10 FEBRUARY 2021

(7.15 pm - 9.40 pm)

PRESENT Councillors Councillor Brenda Fraser (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 and Roz Cordner

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 interest.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

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

4 EXPANSION OF MERTON MEDICAL EDUCATION SERVICES INTO TO
LAVENDER NURSERY SITE AND CLOSURE OF LAVENDER LONDON
ROAD NURSERY (Agenda Item 4)

The Assistant Director for Education and Early Help in Children, Schools and Families informed the panel members of the proposal for the Lavender Nursery site and closure of the Lavender Road Nursery which is still in consultation until 22nd February 2021. The proposal seeks to ensure fair and equal access to education for children of all ages regardless of their disability. Merton works in partnership with the voluntary, independent and private sector to ensure access to childcare and early years' education across the borough in a range of settings.

There are generally fewer free childcare schemes for eligible 2-year-olds. According to the GLA forecast Merton's under-fives has decreased in recent years which is likely to reduce the demand for childcare places however, the secondary school provision appears to be on the increase.

Currently Merton Medical Education Service provides service to children aged 5 to 16 either on-site, via home tuition or in the community depending on their needs. This service was previously located in the bungalow on the Canterbury campus however, this is no longer deemed sufficient as it could only accommodate 20 children but service requires space for 40 children. As such it was moved to Worsfold House in September 2020 for a short term. Lack of a sufficient site means children are having to have home tuition rather than learn with their peers in a social setting / environment.

The option to extend the Canterbury campus was considered but was not taken forward for a number of reasons to include the need for medical students to feel safe and secure. The expansion was also not taken forward due to the cost of expansion outweighing the adaptation of the Lavender site that could have the potential to accommodate 40 to 60 students. A site search looking at other council buildings were looked into but none were vacant or sufficient in size.

The Assistant Director for Education and Early Help in Children, Schools and Families assured the panel that assistance to relocate current pupils at the Lavender site would be available for up to 80 part-time places for two year olds eligible for free nursery places to local provisions from September 2021. Provision for children with not an excess of part-time / term-time places currently in early years' sector to continue on the site for this group of vulnerable children. Support will be given to fee paying families to access alternative provisions across private, voluntary and independent sector from 2021.

Assurance to the panel to continue working with providers in the marketplace, supporting continuous improvement, access to training and working in partnership to ensure sufficiency of provision was also given.

A panel member also part of the Lavender Nursery Parents' Association who do not agree with the proposal to the Lavender site by the council as it felt that the site provides a vital service to around 100 children and currently has over 40 children on its waiting list. The closure of the site would affect early years development of local children and urge the council to reconsider.

5 COVID 19 IMPACT IN MERTON UPDATE - PRESENTATION TO FOLLOW (Agenda Item 5)

The Director of Public Health provided an overview of the impact of Covid-19 in Merton date. Overall the infection rate in Merton and other London boroughs

continues to decline with the R value estimated to be below 1 and positive cases per 100,000 across London boroughs decreasing.

London boroughs were previously purple in colour during the peak of the pandemic. A majority of London boroughs including Merton are now orange with some boroughs green in colour where the case numbers have dropped even more.

Covid-19 continues to put pressure on the NHS but is more manageable although the bed occupancy is still high with the severity of cases continue declining

The Director of Public Health gave a brief local analyse outline with a focus on children and young people among SWL boroughs which shows declining numbers in positive / infection cases. In both the east and west of the borough the case numbers continue to fall with the east having higher numbers throughout the pandemic. Testing centres are available throughout Merton for all age groups and anyone symptomatic whether sever or mild should get tested. There have been far less outbreak in both schools and nurseries in January compared to December due to the Christmas holiday and lockdown but regardless they have not stopped opening especially schools for key workers and SEND schools. LFD testing for students and teachers are now available twice weekly in secondary and primary schools. The number of positive cases following the LFD testing appear to be very low.

ENHANCED COVIC-19 TESTING IN POLLARDS HILL

The Director of Public Health gave a brief overview on the enhanced testing programme also known as the South African variant as it emerged from South Africa and though not more serious it is more infectious and the vaccines may be less affective against it. The purpose of the enhanced testing is to track unknown variances of the covid-19 virus more specifically the South African variant and better understand how the virus mutates but also the behaviour of the new virus. The three key areas being looked at in the enhance testing programme are rate of transmission, whether it can make the disease worse and whether they can evade immunity. There is no outbreak of the new variant in Merton rather there was one case identified in January, isolated and recovered. The enhanced testing programme is aimed at understanding whether the variant is being transmitted in our community thus is now more of a tracking exercise instead of an acute outbreak control. The programme aims to offer around 10,000 track and trace kits to contain and control the variant. All those who live, work or have essential activities in the area will be offered a PCR test ranging from a mobile test, test at a centre and to a door to door home test.

Public Health urges all those worried or concerned to get tested and continue following government guidelines for Covid-19.

Over 5000 testing kits have been handed out to date with around 30-40% positive cases found during this testing. Results from the laboratory have yet to come back as they take more time and positive cases follow the same isolation procedure.

A panel member asked how the individual with the South African variant was identified, treated, what type of vicinity they live in and action taken to minimise spread of the virus.

Another panel member asked if different age groups are susceptible to different variants?

A panel member commented on the positive response from residents to the door knocking and thanked the volunteers and community.

In response to the above the Director of Public Health confirmed that we never expose individuals, the treatment of anyone with a variant is the same as those in receipt of treatment no matter the variant and isolation procedure was in place to ensure minimal spread to the community. No additional cleaning was required and those asymptomatic individuals exposed are invited to come forward for testing as the virus can be transmitted by those who are asymptomatic.

So far the levels of susceptibility have remained the same and may be subject to change in the future.

A panel member commented on media reports of the low vaccine take up from BAME communities and asked what can be done to reduce the reluctance in vaccine take up by these community groups. Could celebrities' / sports personalities be used to promote the vaccine thus increase take up within the BAME communities.

Another panel member asked for clarity over the confusing information on the inoculation of teachers.

A panel member went further to ask about the BAME vaccine figures, when the South African variant was identified in Merton and why the response to lockdown Pollards Hill took so long to come into force.

The Director of Public Health said that there are a range of barriers to vaccination and a lot is being done by the NHS / clinicians to improve vaccine take in all groups. A great deal of work to improve data fragmentation is underway. Data detailing vaccinations by ethnicity are available and the Director of Public Health informed all of the disparities around the number of deaths at the beginning of the pandemic but these are now on the decrease. In terms of our response to the South African variant in Pollards Hill we responded immediately by getting what was needed in place once informed by Public Health England.

The Director of Public Health also said that the JCVI priority vaccination groups are based on reducing mortality not business continuity. Only teachers in SEND schools who are very exposed and pose extreme risks to vulnerable kids are being offered vaccines as a priority.

There was great deal of gratitude shown by the panel for the information presented and community spirit, togetherness as well as the work of the NHS to date.

6 DEPARTMENTAL UPDATE - REPORT TO FOLLOW (Agenda Item 6)

7 PERFORMANCE MONITORING - REPORT TO FOLLOW (Agenda Item 7)

8 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 8)

The work programme was noted.

9 BUDGET AND BUSINESS PLAN 2021-2025 (Agenda Item 9)

Following on from the previous meeting the Director of Corporate Services updated on the third round of the Budget and Business Plan 2020-21 and settlement. The settlement was better than expected with an additional one off funding being available for use in both Children, Schools and Families and Adult Social Care. Between December 2020 and January 2021 there was a Covid and local tax support grant scheme resulting in the reduction in the amount collected by Council Tax due to more people claiming support. It is anticipated that further council tax support in April 2021 when furlough comes to an end is likely unless extended

Additional savings target have been put forward on page 26 and Children's, Schools and Families have put forward additional proposals set out on page 47 with the draft of the Equality Assessment on page 69. Attempts to balance the budget for 2021/22 have been made but still have a shortfall / gap of five-six million for 2022/23 and council reserves have been used to balance the books.

Note there is only one saving for this panel due to the level of underspend in this financial year to be moved to next year.