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CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 29 SEPTEMBER 2021

(7.15 pm - 9.00 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 Russell Makin, Councillor Dennis Pearce,
Mansoor Ahmad and Roz Cordner

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Eleanor Stringer, Joint Deputy Leader and Cabinet
Member for Children and Education

Stella Akintan (Scrutiny Officer), Elizabeth Fitzpatrick (Head of
School Improvement), Jane McSherry (Director of Children,
Schools and Families), Karl Mittelstadt (Head of Policy,
Performance and Partnerships), Tom Procter (Head of Contracts
& School Organisation) and Julia Groom

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor James Holmes.

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

The minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record

4 UPDATE ON COVID 19 IN MERTON - PRESENTATION TO FOLLOW (Agenda Item 4)

The Consultant in Public Health gave an overview of the presentation and reported that:

There was an increase in the rate of infection from 200 to 265 per 100,000 of the population. This has been attributed to the return to school of 5-16 year olds.

There has been a decline in rates amongst 17-24 years down from the high rates over the summer but this could change when students return to college and university in the autumn.

There have been 14 outbreaks in Merton schools and nurseries since 6th September.

In response to questions it was reported that:

The Council have provided support to schools who have had outbreaks.

Currently around 35% of 16-17 year olds have been vaccinated. Measures to improve uptake include; working with Covid champions and young inspectors to promote messages around vaccination

5 SCHOOL PLACES PLANNING STRATEGY (Agenda Item 5)

The Head of Contracts and School Organisation gave an overview of the report.

A panel member asked if schools budgets will be protected as the funding follows the pupil. The Head of Contracts and School Organisation said the council is not generally in a position to protect schools budgets as school funding is determined by a national funding formula. The council can provide advice and some schools may find it beneficial to share resources at the management level.

A panel member asked if decisions about school places can be determined by the council rather than individual schools. The Head of Contracts and School Organisation said the council has statutory powers for Community Schools and to some extent Voluntary Aided schools but not Academies; the preference is always to work in partnership. Enforcement would only be a last resort.

A panel member asked for figures on the cost of the additional schools places and if the council should have found short term accommodation as the need for additional school places was temporary.

The Head of Contracts and School Organisation said that none of the external bodies providing population and pupil projections were of the view that it was temporary at the time of expansions, but we were cautious as soon as there was indication; the expansions completed around 2016 some temporary classrooms were used. The expansion programme was a multi-million pound project and was largely funded by the government.

The Director of Children, Schools and Families said there had always been a pragmatic approach to projection of school places with recognition that the GLA projections are considered to be at the higher end of the scale and therefore the Council has been cautious.

Panel members asked why there has been increase in demand in special educational needs and if there is a strategy to address this. The Director of Children, Schools and Families said there is an increase nationally, the age range for children in receipt of education health and care plans have increased from 5-19 years to 0-25 years. There has been an SEN strategy over a period of time. The approach has been to increase places in special schools as Merton historically had low numbers and support children in mainstream schools wherever possible.

A panel member asked how schools are adapting to change in the school population. The Assistant Director of Education and Early Help said the churn is significant and schools are managing this process, they use the induction process for new children, screening for SEN. Schools are familiar with looking at the data to inform their development plans and how processes might need to be adapted to respond to change in population.

A panel member asked if there will be extra support for schools given the deficit in the dedicated schools grant. The Director of Children, Schools and Families said negotiations will take place with the Department for Education.

A panel member asked about the impact on Head teacher's pay and support available to schools. The Assistant Director of Education and Early Help said discussions are taking place with individual schools and they are encouraged to look at staffing and curriculum models. Head teachers' pay may be affected and this will be discussed with Governing Bodies.

6 DEPARTMENT UPDATE (Agenda Item 6)

The Director of Children, Schools and Families gave an overview of the report.

A panel member asked about the race and equality in schools and what is the nature of the work moving forward. The Assistant Director of Education and Early Help said the challenge is to maintain momentum it maintains a priority for schools. A race identity and leadership programme has been implemented. Panel members asked for more detail on the work taking place in the Forum on race equality.

A panel member asked what will be the biggest challenge the council will face when entering into negotiations with the Department for Education. The Director of Children, Schools and Families said the biggest issues are the Designated Schools Grant deficit, overreliance on the independent sector whilst building up maintained specialist school places and the large numbers of children with an Education Health and Care Plan.

Councillor Hayley Ormrod asked for the minute to record that two years ago the Conservative Group proposed a motion for Whatley Avenue to remain an Education facility which was not passed.

RESOLVED

The Chair congratulated the Department on their successful Youth Justice Inspection.

7 CABINET MEMBER PRIORITIES (Agenda Item 7)

Special Educational Needs linked to the Designated Schools Grant
Pupil Places –The excess number of school places is a London issue. Do not want to close schools and recognise this could pose huge budget issues for individual schools

Focus on vulnerable children – good work on free school meals and work to close attainment gap. There has been an increase in anxiety and depression amongst young people.

A panel member asked about plans for foster carer recruitment. The Interim Assistant Director for Children's Social Care said the recruitment is going well considering the impact of the pandemic. The Mocking-Up Programme has been successful and the picture will improve as the lockdown is lifted.

8 PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT (Agenda Item 8)

The Head of Policy Performance and Partnerships gave an overview of the report and highlighted that the assessments are red for circumstantial reasons rather than a problem with the service.

9 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 9)

The Panel noted the work programme