

All minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the committee/panel. To find out the date of the next meeting please check the calendar of events at your local library or online at www.merton.gov.uk/committee.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 3 NOVEMBER 2021

(7.15 pm - 9.55 pm)

PRESENT: Councillors Councillor Sally Kenny (in the Chair),
Councillor Hayley Ormrod, 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

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Eleanor Stringer (Cabinet Member for Children and
Education) Councillor Tobin Byers (Cabinet Member for Finance)

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), Keith Shipman (Head of Education Inclusion) and
Dr Dagmar Zeuner (Director, Public Health)

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)

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

4 IMPACT OF COVID-19 IN MERTON (Agenda Item 4)

In response to questions, the Director of Public Health reported that she is working with NHS colleagues to obtain meaningful data including take up amongst 12-15 year olds.

In response to questions on improving the take up amongst young people, the Director of Public Health reported that her team are listening to young people to understand their barriers to take up and developing appropriate support.

RESOLVED

The Chair thanked the Director for her report

5 BUSINESS PLAN 2022-2026 (Agenda Item 5)

The Director of Corporate Services gave an update on the Business Plan, highlighting that current assumptions were revised for inflation and the staff pay award. Covid is still having an effect which has an impact on department's ability to deliver savings over future years. The council has taken the rare step of writing back some savings which are not achievable for 2021-2022 and built in the impact of the emissions based charging decision. This results in £3.6 million in savings not achieved. Some reserves will be used to mitigate impact.

A panel member asked for further details about savings not achieved. The Director of Corporate Services clarified it included emissions based charging and the Central London Community Healthcare contract. Further financial pressures include; parking, leisure centres and enforcement of council tax.

In response to questions the Director of Corporate Services reported that;

- The impact of inflation on council services will include higher costs for outsourced services.
- A range of options are being considered in regards to the re-modelling of the Designated Schools Grant deficit.

A Panel member asked the Cabinet Members to set out what further contingencies are being put on place to mitigate the impact of the Designated Schools Grant deficit

The Cabinet Member for Children and Education said there is a risk of the Designated Schools Grant overspend increasing in future years requiring bigger savings earlier. Everything is being done to avoid that scenario.

The Cabinet Member for Finance said the £24 million figure will be reduced over the course of the medium Term Financial Strategy with some savings for the 2023-2024 year. Detailed scenario planning is difficult because outcomes of the discussion with Department for Education will not be known until January and decisions about funding may not be immediately clear. Every Director is looking at potential savings and discussing with Cabinet Leads which will be presented to the December Cabinet and come to scrutiny in January.

A panel member asked about the rise in safeguarding referrals and steps being taken to manage the financial impact.

The Director of Children Schools and Families said they are monitoring monthly and still facing a number of Covid pressures but expect to see them reduce over time. The department is also aiming to reduce the reliance on the provider market and bring services into the borough to offset increased costs.

A panel member asked about the tolerance level for using the reserves to reduce the gap moving forward. The Director of Corporate Services said it is a balance between levels of reserves required what can be used from ear-marked reserves, the budget gap and levels of risk.

6 SUPPORT FOR PUPILS AFTER THE PANDEMIC (Agenda Item 6)

The Headteacher and Assistant Headteacher of Poplar Primary School gave an overview of their presentation

A Panel member asked what worked well in regards to support from the council and what could have been better. The Headteacher of Poplar Primary School said the council officer provided a daily briefing which was helpful. The Assistant Headteacher said they would like to see more equitable support for mental health across schools.

In response to questions the Headteacher and the Assistant Headteacher reported that;

- Mental Health support to pupils consists of gradual spiraling up of support depending on the assessment of need.
- During lockdown pupils for whom English is not a first language, found their speed at learning English was impacted if it was not spoken at home.
- Support for teachers including workload and stress levels is currently being considered.
- There is a good uptake of school meals. There is also demand for the food bank
- Teachers have been affected by Covid, long Covid. This has had an impact but schools are learning to adapt.

The Assistant Director for Education and Early Help gave an overview of the report

A panel member asked about mental health needs in schools and the transition from primary to secondary schools. The Head of Education Inclusion said they are currently looking at resources within the system to support mental health. The need is growing for transitions support from secondary school into college.

A panel member asked if the council is providing support to schools on how to spend the catch up funding and if good practice on ways to assist pupils after the pandemic is being shared more widely. The Assistant Director for Education and Early Help reported that Ofsted will be looking at how funding has been used during routine inspections. Council advisors will also be able to share good practice as they visit different schools.

In response to questions the Assistant Director for Education and Early Help said measuring progress of programmes to support pupils who fell behind during the pandemic will be challenging as schools measure in different ways.

A panel member asked about numbers of people going to youth centres. The Head of Education Inclusion said there are large numbers attending adventure playgrounds, there has been a big recovery in other youth groups. However older young people are always the most challenging to engage.

RESOLVED

The Panel thanked teachers for their work during the pandemic and for giving up their evening to attend the meeting.

A future department update to look at gaps in attainment after the pandemic, different interventions put in place to support pupils and how success is measured.

7 DEPARTMENTAL UPDATE (Agenda Item 7)

The Director of Children Schools and Families gave an overview of the report
A panel member asked why the consultation on home to school travel assistance policy has not been presented to this panel for pre-decision scrutiny.

.The Director for Children Schools and Families said the consultation is a discussion with parents and does not involve decisions at this point. The Director will provide an update on this process to the next meeting

The Cabinet Member for Children and Education declared an interest in the social workers in schools project and stated the funding was awarded to Merton before she was employed in the organisation. The project is being rigorously evaluated to determine if it produces positive outcome in which case further funding will be sought.

It was noted that Ofsted had recently made it clear that they expected a smaller number of schools than previously to be graded 'outstanding' as inspection of all outstanding schools are now part of routine inspections.

RESOLVED

The Department Update Report to include emerging findings from the consultation on the home to school assistance policy.

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

The Cabinet Member said her priorities are as follows:

- Return of Ofsted inspections and to understand the new regime as well as provide support and challenge to schools
- Look at ways to involve councillors in children's social care
- Special Educational Need and Disability and the Designated School Grant to assess the risk and opportunities to get it right.

RESOLVED

The Cabinet member agreed to circulate the Cabinet paper on home to school travel assistance consultation to panel members

9 PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT (Agenda Item 9)

The Head of Policy, Performance and Partnerships gave an overview of the report.

RESOLVED

The Chair thanked officers for their report

10 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 10)

The Work Programme was noted