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CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 10 NOVEMBER 2022

(7.15 pm - 9.30 pm)

PRESENT: Councillors Councillor Usaama Kaweesa (in the Chair),
Councillor Chessie Flack, Councillor Caroline Charles,
Councillor Jil Hall, Councillor Billy Hayes,
Councillor Andrew Howard, Councillor Linda Kirby,
Councillor Samantha MacArthur, Councillor Dennis Pearce,
Mansoor Ahmad, Roz Cordner, Cruise and Dr Stannard

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Councillor Sally Kenny, Cabinet Member for
Education and Lifelong Learning

Stella Akintan (Scrutiny Officer), Elizabeth Fitzpatrick (Assistant
Director for Education and Early Help), Julia Groom and Jane
McSherry (Director of Children, Schools and Families) Dheeraj
Chibber, (Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Youth
Inclusion).

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Michael Butcher, Councillor Sheri-Ann Bhim attended as a substitute.

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 MERTON SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT (Agenda Item 4)

The Independent Scrutineer and the Young Scrutineer gave an overview of the report, highlighting that their role is as constructive and critical friends to the partnership and to promote improvement.

The Scrutineers said they have been undertaking thematic scrutinies with new emerging issues including, adultification of children, when young children are treated as adults. The case of Child Q in Hackney was cited as an example. The Partnership are also looking at sexual harassment and abuse. They also have a statutory responsibility to produce an annual report.

A panel member asked if girls are subjected to female genital mutilation in this country or taken abroad. The Independent Scrutineer said prevention of FGM is a safeguarding issue. The statistics for Merton will be provided.

A panel member said it is a very good report and asked the young Scrutineer about engagement with young people. It was reported that they hold focus groups and recognised that some children cannot come to a central location.

A Panel member suggested that boxes could be used to gather a broader range of young people's views about safeguarding issues anonymously. The independent scrutineer said some schools have put this in place but others were reluctant to do so because they cannot respond to anonymous concerns easily, limiting the ability to investigate. The Young Scrutineer said children and young people want a range of ways to feed back.

A panel member asked about work taking place to protect children against other children, for example with regards to bullying and county lines. The independent scrutineer said a sub-group of the partnership looks at this under the theme of contextual safeguarding. Toolkits have been developed for practitioners and training is provided.

The independent scrutineer offered to share the presentation on sexual harassment in schools, which provides some key learning.

A Panel member asked if the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on domestic abuse is an issue. It was reported that family stresses such as financial insecurity and worries exacerbate domestic abuse and that officers are alert to these possible stresses.

RESOLVED

The Chair thanked the Scrutineers for attending the meeting

5 CHILD HEALTHY WEIGHT PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 5)

The Consultant in Public Health gave an overview of the report. She reported that the proportions of children and Young People deemed overweight increased during covid. There is a stigma attached to obesity and an impact children and young people's mental health. There is a link with obesity and deprivation. Rates are higher in the east of the borough and the gap is increasing.

A panel member asked how the council evaluates the schemes used to address these issues in order to determine which ones are successful or not working. The Consultant in Public Health said they rely on national campaigns which have been researched and have an evidence base are used and will take issues of evaluation back to colleagues for further consideration.

A panel member said it can be difficult to ensure families who are most in need are supported and there is an important role for school governors to enable this to happen and it would be good to get this on agendas for school governor meetings. The Consultant in Public Health said ensuring support is available to those who are most in need is an on-going challenge, there has been some community led research which involved families and young people and looked at the affordability of activities. There is an important Role of school governors in healthy school's programme.

A Panel member said wards with higher levels of obesity seem to be less favourable for cycling with no opportunities for children. The Consultant in Public Health said the council and partners are developing a cycling strategy, although it can be difficult to improve infrastructure in certain parts of the borough.

A panel member asked what causes obesity and how is it classified. The Consultant in Public Health said there are multi-faceted reasons including income, access to green spaces, housing issues. BMI classification is the main measure used. In adults BMI is supplemented with waist circumference.

The Chair asked who would wish to visit services in relation to healthy schools and report back to the Panel. Councillors McArthur, Charles and Kirby said they would be interested.

RESOLVED

The Chair thanked the Consultant in Public Health for her report.

6 DEPARTMENTAL UPDATE (Agenda Item 6)

The Director of Children Schools and Families said that the Department (as part of the SEND local area partnership) had recently been revisited by Ofsted and the CQC, as part of their inspection activity related to special educational needs and disability. The outcome of that revisit is not yet in the public domain, and will be shared once it is.

The Chair said some Headteachers had approached him with concerns about gang related activity. The Director of Children Schools and Families said that officers are working with police colleagues with regards to youth community safety. The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion said the safeguarding partnership has had a series of meetings involving senior police officers. Police officers within schools are providing reassurance. These officers are well embedded in Merton and reach out to primary schools.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning said she had visited local youth services and found lots of good work taking place.

A Panel member asked at what stage it is appropriate to inform ward councillors about local criminal activity. The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and

Youth Inclusion said the activities cross ward boundaries. The police communicate with schools but there is a need to be mindful of data protection and confidentiality.

A Panel member asked about the approach taken to support schools with a budget deficit. The Assistant Director for Education and Early Help said schools are facing significant pressures with energy bills and unfunded staff wage increases. The department works with schools when they want to set a deficit budget. There are substantial talks if it is a large deficit and schools are required to prepare a recovery plan.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning said the Leader has written to the Secretary of State asking for more funding.

7 PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT (Agenda Item 7)

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

A Panel member said several red indicators have no benchmarks. The Head of Performance, Improvement and Partnerships said that bench marking can come from various sources and depends on what is available when reporting from, for example, the Department for Education.

8 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 8)

Councillor Kirby, Chair of the child self-harm task group gave an overview of the work stating that they have met with the Chief Executive of Stem Four, a mental health charity and will attend Merton secondary head meeting in the new year. This work is building on the 2019 review of children's mental health.

RESOLVED

The Chair thanked councillors for their work.