

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday, 13 January 2021

This Scrutiny meeting was conducted via Zoom, in accordance with the provisions of the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020.

Present:

Councillor Stone – in the Chair
Councillors Abdullatif, Cooley, Hewitson, Kilpatrick, Lovecy, Madeleine Monaghan, Reeves, Reid and Wilson

Co-opted Voting Members:

Ms S Barnwell, Parent Governor Representative
Ms Z Derraz, Parent Governor Representative

Co-opted Non Voting Members:

Mr L Duffy, Secondary Sector Teacher Representative

Also present:

Councillor Bridges, Executive Member for Children and Schools
Councillor Murphy, Deputy Leader

Apologies:

Councillors Alijah and McHale
Ms J Fleet, Primary Sector Teacher Representative

CYP/21/1 Minutes

Decision

To approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 2 December 2020.

CYP/21/2 Children and Education Services Budget 2021/22

The Committee received a report of the Strategic Director of Children and Education Services which outlined the financial management and leadership of the Directorate's budget, the financial position which included demography, growth of demand and a series of savings options proposed by officers aligned to the remit of the Committee to contribute to the Council's duty to achieve a balanced budget in 2021/22. The report also set out the impact the options would have on residents and the workforce. It noted that the Council's budget proposals for 2021/22 and onwards would be subject to further refinement following feedback from public consultation and scrutiny committees and that final budget proposals would be made to Scrutiny and Executive in February 2021. The report reflected the fact that the Council had declared a climate emergency by making carbon reduction a key consideration in the Council's planning and budget proposals.

Officers referred to the main points and themes within the report, which included:

- The background and context;
- Directorate budget approach;
- Directorate Revenue Budget 2021/22 and proposed savings;
- Changes to the report since it was last considered at the Committee's meeting on 4 November 2020;
- The impact on the workforce and Manchester residents; and
- Next steps.

Some of the key points and themes that arose from the Committee's discussions were:

- Whether the proposed savings rated as "red" in the table appended to the report could be looked at again and whether there were any alternatives that could be considered;
- Concern about the proposal relating to the Children and Parent Service, outlined at point 4.56 in the report, noting the considerable benefits of early intervention in improving outcomes for children and families and reducing the need for more expensive interventions later on;
- The impact of COVID-19 on families and on Children's Services;
- Request for further clarification on the information relating to residential placements, including the plans for Lyndene Children's Home;
- Concern about the proposed cut to funding for interventions to support the improvement of maintained schools outlined at points 4.47 and 4.48 in the report; and
- Request for further clarification on the savings relating to Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) and the impact of these.

The Strategic Director of Children and Education Services informed the Committee that, as the majority of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) was allocated to schools and 47% of the Children's Services budget was spent on care provision for children, the opportunities and areas of the budget where savings could be made was limited. He advised that these areas were interconnected so changes in one area of the service would have an impact elsewhere and that none of these proposals were without risk.

In response to Members' comments about the impact of the pandemic, the Strategic Director of Children and Education Services advised that there had been an increase in requests for advice and support and an increase in referrals to Children's Services, which had included an increase in issues relating to domestic abuse but that the number of children becoming Looked After had not significantly increased so far. He advised that it was a challenging situation as it was more difficult to predict future demand. He also outlined some of work that was currently being developed to support children and families during this time, including short break provision for children attending special schools, sessions for children and young people, similar to the summer holiday provision, and help with paying utility bills for families who were struggling financially.

The Strategic Director of Children and Education Services informed Members that Lyndene was a commissioned children's home and that the children and young people being placed there predominantly had additional health needs, learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorder. He outlined work taking place with health colleagues to commission specialist provision and re-purpose the home to improve outcomes for these children. He suggested that the Committee might want to look at this work further at a future meeting.

In response to a Member's question, the Strategic Director of Children and Education Services clarified that it was proposed to re-purpose three Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) workers to work with foster families to reduce the risk of foster care placements breaking down. He informed Members that unplanned endings of foster care placements could result in significantly increased costs if the young person had to be placed in a residential children's home.

The Strategic Director of Children and Education Services reported that, as Manchester was now receiving more UASC, this enabled the work to support them to be more intelligence-led and for better commissioning arrangements, based on contracts for supporting a number of young people rather than buying ad hoc support for individual children. He informed the Committee that the Home Office had also recently increased the grant payment to the Council for UASC. Therefore, he advised, that the savings in this area did not represent a reduction in the quality of support provided to these young people. He suggested that the Committee might want to look at the work taking place to secure settled status for these young people.

In response to a Member's question, the Strategic Director of Children and Education Services outlined the support provided to Care Leavers and advised the Committee that a report providing more information on this would be submitted to the next meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel.

The Chair noted the improvements that had been made in Children's Services in recent years, expressed disappointment that the Council had been put in this financial position due to the level of funding provided by the national government and expressed concern that this could impact on these services in future.

Decisions

1. That the Committee does not support the proposal for the revised parenting commission at 4.56 in the report, which would reduce the number of families receiving this support, and believes that this reduction in early intervention would result in increased costs later on.
2. That the Committee does not support the proposed cut to funding for interventions to support the improvement of maintained schools outlined at points 4.47 and 4.48 in the report, particularly in light of the impact that COVID-19 is having on children's education.
3. To receive further information on the plans to re-purpose Lyndene Children's Home in a future report.

4. That the Committee will monitor the impact of the transformation of CAMHS.

CYP/21/3 Update on Schools and Their Response to COVID-19

The Committee received a report of the Director of Education which provided a further update on the impact of COVID-19 on schools in the city and how this had been responded to during the Autumn term 2020. Members were also provided with an update on how the situation had changed since the report had been published.

Some of the main points and themes highlighted by the Director of Education included:

- The remote learning offer;
- How the COVID Winter Grant was used to make provision over Christmas for children and young people eligible for Free School Meals;
- The announcement the previous week that schools and colleges would only be open for vulnerable children and children of critical workers, with other children accessing remote learning from home;
- The cancellation of GCSE and A-level examinations, noting that the Council and schools were still awaiting further guidance on how pupils' grades would be assessed; and
- Testing for COVID-19 in schools.

The Executive Member for Children and Schools expressed concern about how the situation had been managed by the Department for Education (DfE) and outlined the challenges that schools had faced.

Some of the key points and themes that arose from the Committee's discussions were:

- Sharing the Executive Member's concern about the way the situation had been managed by the national government, in particular the Secretary of State for Education, including that decisions were being made late and were not well communicated;
- The impact of this on schools and pressure on schools' senior leadership teams;
- To thank officers and the Executive Member for their work supporting schools during this challenging time;
- The challenges that schools were facing due to the high number of families who met the criteria for being critical workers;
- To highlight that schools and colleges offering vocational qualifications to students in Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 were informed that the examinations did not have to go ahead less than 12 hours before they were due to start;
- That it was important to remember and to continue to remind government that Manchester schools had been dealing with high infection rates since September 2020, including over 17,000 pupils having to self-isolate, and the impact this had had;
- Request for more information on COVID-19 testing in schools, including whether it would be voluntary;

- The challenges of remote learning, including pupils' access to the internet and devices and whether the expectations for the amount of remote learning taking place were sustainable;
- The impact of the pandemic on pupils in Years 10 and 12 who were due to take GCSE and A-level examinations in 2022;
- Concern that there was a lack of consistency between schools about requiring staff to come into the school building to deliver online lessons; and
- That providing food parcels to families who were entitled to Free School Meals instead of vouchers or money was inappropriate and stemmed from negative attitudes towards and lack of trust in working class families.

The Director of Education clarified that COVID-19 testing in schools was currently voluntary and only for secondary and college-age students who were attending school. She reported that, even where families had internet access, many did not have a separate device for each school-age child to use and that feedback indicated that secondary-age children were being given priority for this in many families; however, she advised that remote learning did not have to take place online. She reported that children who did not have access to remote learning or a quiet space at home to work were now classed as vulnerable pupils who could continue to attend school but that this added to the challenges schools were facing with the number of pupils who met the eligibility criteria for attending school. She advised Members that, even if pupils were awarded fair GCSE and A-level grades which took into account the additional challenges children in this region had faced, they would still have missed out on their education and parts of the course content.

The Executive Member for Children and Schools supported the Committee's comments regarding Free School Meals. He expressed concern about the quality of some of the food parcels provided to families and that benefits were not sufficient for people to be able to feed their children. He advised Members that both schools and families were in a difficult position regarding the issue of which children should be in school and that there needed to be better communication to employers about who should or should not still be going into work and appropriate financial support put in place. He informed Members of the positive feedback from schools about the support they had received from the Council during the pandemic.

In response to Members' questions, the Director of Education reported that Alternative Provision was required to remain open for all pupils and that supplementary schools could stay open, although many supplementary schools had chosen to move to remote learning, and that both these types of settings were being provided with support and guidance by her team. She outlined how the Council was working to achieve a consistent approach across the city, liaising with trade unions and sending Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and other communications to all schools.

Decisions

1. To thank the Director of Education and her team for all the support they have provided to schools during the pandemic and to ask her to pass those thanks on.

2. To agree that the Chair of the Committee writes to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education to raise concerns that the Secretary of State is not fit for the post.

CYP/21/4 Our Manchester Strategy Reset - Draft Strategy

The Committee received a report of the Strategic Director of Children and Education Services which provided an update on the draft *Our Manchester Strategy – Forward to 2025* reset document. A draft of the reset Strategy was appended to the report. The report noted that achieving Manchester's zero carbon target was reflected throughout the work on the Our Manchester Strategy reset and would be clearly captured in the final reset document.

The main points and themes within the report included:

- The background to the Our Manchester Strategy reset;
- Our Manchester Strategy – Forward to 2025;
- Final design and communications; and
- Next steps.

A Member expressed concern that, although the COVID-19 pandemic was referred to in the Strategy, it did not fully reflect the impact of the pandemic across all areas of the Strategy. The Deputy Leader advised Members that it was difficult to fully reflect how the situation would develop as it was still changing but that it was important to ensure that the city was in the right position to react to changes and to enable local residents to benefit. He reported that the Strategy was subject to change and that the Council had tried to engage on it with residents who would not normally respond. He informed Members that the Strategy aimed to set down key principles and a vision of where the city should be in five years' time.

Decision

To note the report and to thank everyone for their work on the Strategy.

CYP/21/5 Overview Report

A report of the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit was submitted. The overview report contained key decisions within the Committee's remit, responses to previous recommendations and the Committee's work programme, which the Committee was asked to approve.

The Chair informed the Committee that he had discussed with another Committee Member the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of young people and their families, including both positive and negative aspects, and a suggestion that the Committee should receive a report about this at a future meeting. He advised that he would discuss this with officers after the meeting.

Decision

To note the report and agree the work programme, subject to the above comment.