

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2020

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, Sameem Ali, Alijah, Cooley, Hewitson, T Judge, 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

Ms J Fleet, Primary Sector Teacher Representative

Also present:

Councillor Bridges, Executive Member for Children and Schools

Apologies:

Councillors McHale and Sadler

CYP/20/41 Committee Changes

The Chair welcomed Councillor Abdullatif who had recently joined the Committee. He informed Members that Councillor Sadler had asked to be removed from the membership of the Committee due to family commitments. He thanked Councillor Sadler for her contribution to the Committee over the years and sent the Committee's best wishes to her family.

CYP/20/42 Minutes

Decision

To approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 7 October 2020.

CYP/20/43 Update on Opening of Schools for All Children and Young People

The Committee received a report of the Director of Education which provided a further update on the full reopening of schools for all pupils in the Autumn term with a specific focus on school attendance. The report also noted that, through the learning and education system, children were informed about and understood environmental issues and the negative impact of carbon; promoting safe and healthy lives.

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

- Attendance;
- School closures;
- Virtual School;
- Elective Home Education (EHE); and
- Exclusions.

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

- Sport for children during lockdown, including swimming and sports activity outside of school;
- To commend the work of the Director of Customer Services and Transaction and her team in setting up a system to provide payments for families entitled to Free School Meals;
- Highlighting that the National Education Union (NEU) was calling for schools to be closed during the lockdown;
- Actions being taken to provide children with laptops or other devices and internet access;
- What had been the outcome from the Outbreak meetings referred to in the report;
- What could be done to reassure parents that it was safe for their children to return to school; and
- Where parents chose to home educate, ensuring that the child was provided with a suitable education and that parents understood that the child would be taken off the school roll.

The Director of Education informed the Committee that her service was working with schools to identify the best solution for providing devices and internet access to children. She advised Members that allocation of laptops to schools by the Department for Education (DfE) was now based on the number of pupils being required to self-isolate.

The Director of Education reported that the Council had arranged for Quality Assurance professionals to visit all Manchester schools to get an understanding of the remote learning offer across the city and what help schools might need. She suggested that, once this had been completed, the Committee might want to consider a report on this. Members welcomed this suggestion. A Member requested that this include a particular focus on Years 11 and 13 as these pupils were due to take important examinations in the summer of 2021. The Member also requested that, where schools were streaming lessons, data be included on how many pupils had the equipment to access these lessons. The Executive Member for Children and Schools expressed concern that Manchester children would be expected to take examinations at the same time as and be compared against pupils from other parts of the country where levels of COVID-19 were lower and pupils had missed less school due to self-isolation.

The Director of Education advised that she would check what sports activities children were able to access during lockdown and share this information with

Members.

The Director of Education explained how multi-agency Outbreak meetings took place when an unexplained cluster of COVID-19 cases occurred in a school to ascertain why this had happened and to identify what could be put in place to prevent it from happening again. Examples included staff or children from different bubbles coming into contact at break time or staff car-sharing. She advised Members that this information was being shared with schools and they were being asked to consider this in their risk assessments.

The Director of Education reported that the Council had undertaken spot checks of 10% of school risk assessments and that the Health and Safety Executive was also checking how schools were managing the situation. She advised that all the feedback was that Manchester schools were managing this well and evidence showed that infection was largely coming from the community rather than being spread in schools. She drew Members' attention to the Attendance Helpline which parents were able to ring to speak to someone who was not from the school who had access to school risk assessments and could give them reassurance about the measures that had been put in place.

The Head of School Quality Assurance and Strategic SEND advised that 118 new applications for EHE had been received since September 2020, which was 50 more than for the same time last year. She stated that 74 had so far been assessed and judged as either suitable or unsuitable, 70 of which had been completed within 20 days. She reported that the current policy was that once parents had requested to home educate and that education had been deemed to be suitable, the child would be removed from the school roll. She informed Members that parents were asked for the reason that they had decided to home educate and, while some had cited anxiety about the spread of COVID-19 in schools as a reason, others stated that they had enjoyed having more time with their children during the first lockdown. She also cited some of the work schools, particularly special schools, had done to address parental anxiety, such as arranging a bespoke package with a limited timetable.

Decisions

1. To request a report on remote learning, to include a particular focus on Years 11 and 13 and information on the numbers of pupils who are able to access any streamed lessons or online learning that is being made available.
2. To note that the Director of Education will provide information to Members on sports activity available to children during lockdown.
3. To recognise the contribution of staff, parents and pupils in the re-opening of schools, to acknowledge the challenges they are facing and to ask the Strategic Director of Children and Education Services and the Director of Education to pass on the Committee's thanks.

CYP/20/44 Children and Young People's Plan 2020 - 2024

The Committee received a report of the Strategic Director of Children and Education Services which presented the refreshed Children and Young People's Plan 2020 – 2024. It provided an overview of the process that was undertaken in collaboration with children and young people in Manchester and members of the Children's Board. It highlighted how the final product was aligned to other strategic plans and identified sharper and more ambitious, key priorities, ways of working and measures of success.

The report noted that one of the key priorities for the Children and Young People's Plan was for children and young people to be able to live in a society where environmental issues were intrinsic to decision making. It stated that key outcomes, including the reduction in hospital admissions for young people with asthma, could only be achieved if the plan had a specific focus on what could be done to improve the environment in which children and young people lived.

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

- The background to the plan;
- The process for developing the plan, including the involvement of children and young people;
- Next steps; and
- The plan on a page, which was appended to the report.

Members recognised the contributions of young people to this plan and welcomed the inclusion of the plan on a page, which summarised this work.

The Strategic Director of Children and Education Services suggested that the Committee receive an annual report on the progress of this work, to which the Chair agreed.

In response to a Member's question on whether the impact of race and ethnicity could be more explicitly reflected in the metrics, the Strategic Director of Children and Education Services advised that data could be broken down by ethnicity and that, where ethnicity played a significant role, this could be highlighted in the update report.

Decisions

1. To receive an annual report on the progress of this work.
2. That Members will provide continued support to promote the plan throughout their civic duties to the wider Council and its partnerships, thus promoting a safe, happy, healthy and successful future for Manchester's children and young people.
3. To thank everyone who had been involved in this work and to ask the Strategic Director of Children and Education Services to pass on the Committee's thanks.

CYP/20/45 Learning and Impact from the Quality Assurance Framework

The Committee received a presentation of the Strategic Lead for Safeguarding which provided an overview of the learning and impact from the Quality Assurance Framework.

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

- Background to the Quality Assurance Framework;
- Key findings and data from the past 12 months;
- The impact of this work;
- The strengths and areas for continued focus identified through the Framework; and
- Next steps.

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

- Whether the pandemic had had an impact on this work; and
- To note that the outcome of 51% of the audits recorded between September 2019 and August 2020 had been "requires improvement" and to ask what steps were taken in these cases.

The Strategic Director of Children and Education Services clarified that this presentation focused on the Quality Assurance Framework and work to improve social work practice, rather than on levels of demand. The Deputy Director of Children's Services informed the Committee that there had been an increase in referrals since the schools had re-opened to all pupils, which was similar to pre-COVID-19 referral levels, but that this had been a gradual increase which the service had had the capacity to manage.

The Strategic Lead for Safeguarding explained how the new judgements from audits were based on quality of practice and impact on children, whereas prior to the introduction of this Framework the emphasis had been on compliance, such as whether the right documents were in the case file. The Social Work Consultant informed the Committee that, where she had audited a case and judged it as "requires improvement", she would have a reflective discussion with the Social Worker and they would put a plan in place, which she would then review with the Social Worker. She also outlined how findings from the audits fed into Workforce Development plans, informed Teaching Tuesday sessions and were used in learning circles to share best practice.

Decision

To thank officers and welcome the work taking place in this area.

CYP/20/46 Council's Medium Term Financial Plan and Strategy for 2021/22

CYP/20/47 Budget Options for 2021/22

The Committee considered a report of the Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer that set out the impact of COVID-19 and other pressures and changes on the Council's budget for the period 2021-2025. The report also set out the impact of COVID-19 on the capital programme and the implications for the budget. The report stated that the budget 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.

The main points and themes within the report included: -

- The Medium Term Financial Plan remained challenged by uncertainty, which included the outcome of the Spending Review and post 2021/22 the potential changes to how local government funding was distributed;
- Prior to COVID-19 there was an underlying budget gap of c£20m for 2021/22 rising to c£80m by 2024/25;
- Dealing with the impact of COVID-19 had resulted in major spending pressures, particularly in social care, but also across all Directorates;
- The forecasted budget shortfall relating to COVID-19 pressures and the Budget Position 2021/22 to 2024/25;
- Initial proposals across all Directorates to start addressing the budget gap in advance of the Spending Review and Local Government Financial Settlement;
- The need to undertake an Equality Impact Assessment on the options put forward, particularly those that involve impacts on services for residents and reductions in the Council's workforce;
- Proposed consultation on budget options and timescales; and
- Next steps.

The Committee also considered a report of the Strategic Director for Children and Education Services which outlined the financial position and set out officer options for savings against each service area aligned to the Committee's remit to help achieve a balanced budget in 2021/22.

The main points and themes within the report included: -

- Background and context;
- The Directorate's budget approach;
- The Children and Education Services Directorate Revenue Budget 2021/22;
- Areas for consideration, subject to the outcome of the Local Authority Settlement;
- Impact on the workforce;
- Next steps; and
- A summary of the savings proposed.

The Committee was invited to comment on the reports prior to their submission to the Executive on 11 November 2020.

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

- Concern about the financial position the Council was in and the level of funding from the national Government and that Members should lobby the Government for more funding, including money to cover the additional costs the Council had incurred in responding to the pandemic;
- Concern about the number of unknown factors, such as how much the financial package from the Government would be and what the future demand on services would be;
- A suggestion that the Council's reserves could be used to address the funding gaps;
- Concern that any reduction in early intervention would impact negatively on children and their families and be more costly in the long term;
- Concern that the pandemic was disproportionately affecting some groups, such as children and young people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, that budget cuts could embed inequalities further and the importance of looking at Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) when assessing these options;
- Concern about the impact of proposals on families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF);
- Concern about the removal of Council funding for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) at a time when demand for mental health support was likely to increase; and
- To ask for further information on the £400k saving from the Free Travel budget 2021/22 which was referred to in the report.

The Strategic Director for Children and Education Services informed the Committee that the options for making budget cuts within the Directorate were limited, for example, because much of the Education Services budget came from the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) which could only be used for limited purposes, and that every possible budget saving option would have an impact on children and young people. He advised that EIAs would be used to assess the impact of the proposals of different groups but it was expected that the proposed savings options would impact across all groups. He advised Members that effective early intervention did reduce costs later; however, there were limited options available for making savings.

In response to a Member's question about the parenting commission referred to in section 4.52 of the Budget Options report, the Deputy Director of Children's Services advised that efficiencies could be made within this and that the specification of which families would be eligible for support under the proposed revised commission was still to be determined. He clarified that section 4.55 of this report referred to costs which could be avoided by preventing children from entering the care system or finding a permanent solution for Our Children (Looked After Children) which enabled them to leave the care of the local authority, using approaches such as Early Help, Alonzi House and permanence planning.

The Strategic Director for Children and Education Services reported that there had been an underspend on the NRPF budget and the proposed budget reduction in this area was to remove that underspend. He informed Members that the removal of

Council funding for CAMHS had been considered by the Committee previously and this decision had already been taken. He advised Members that the national Government had previously provided councils with ringfenced funding for this service but had ceased providing ringfenced funding a few years ago. He reported that, at that time, most councils had stopped providing funding to their local CAMHS service and Manchester City Council had continued to provide this funding for a number of years but had subsequently decided that it could no longer continue to provide this funding. In response to a Member's question, he clarified that the proposed reduction in Early Years Speech and Language referred to in section 4.53 of the Budget Options report related to training for staff on the early identification of young children with speech and language needs. He reported that training on this had already been delivered on a large scale across Early Years and health staff and that specialist support for children in need of speech and language therapy was separate from this.

The Director of Education informed Members that the criteria for eligibility for Free Travel passes to school had already been changed but that passes had continued to be provided for children who had been eligible at the time they started at their current school, even if they would not have been eligible under the new scheme. She advised that the cost of the scheme had reduced over time due to that cohort of pupils who had been eligible under the old scheme moving through the education system and due to improved sufficiency of school places, meaning that more children were able to be allocated a suitable school place near their home than had been the case a few years ago.

Decisions

1. To note that the Committee's comments will be provided to the Executive in advance of its meeting on 11 November 2020.
2. To record the Committee's dissatisfaction with budget proposals which would affect vulnerable children in Manchester but to recognise that this situation is the result of the levels of funding provided by the national Government and that Members will continue to lobby Government on this matter.

CYP/20/48 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.

Decision

To note the report and agree the work programme.