

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 10 February 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, Alijah, Chohan, 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
Dr W Omara, 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:

Councillor McHale

CYP/21/06 Minutes

The Chair informed the Committee that the Executive had agreed with the Committee's views on the proposed revised parenting commission and that this budget proposal would not be taken forward. He also informed Members that, as agreed at the last meeting, he had written to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education but, as yet, he had not received a response.

Decision

To approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 13 January 2021.

CYP/21/07 Update on Schools and Settings 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 and settings in the city. The report also provided some information collected during the autumn term from children and young people about the impact of COVID-19. The report outlined the support that continued to be provided to schools and settings and also to families through the use of the winter COVID grant. The report stated that through the learning and

education system children were informed and understood environmental issues and the negative impact of carbon; promoting safe and healthy lives.

The main points and themes within the report included:

- Numbers of positive cases of COVID-19;
- Numbers of children on site;
- Early Years settings;
- Lateral Flow testing;
- Remote learning;
- Safeguarding;
- Mental health and wellbeing;
- Free School Meals during term time;
- COVID winter grant; and
- Children and young people's views and COVID.

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

- To recognise the important role that the Council had been playing in supporting schools during this time;
- Engagement with remote learning, including how this was being monitored and how lack of engagement was being addressed;
- Children attending school during lockdown, including the level of demand for places;
- Request for a breakdown by ethnicity of children who had tested positive for COVID-19 and were having to self-isolate;
- Were nurseries reluctant to offer places to new children in the current situation and were some children, therefore, unable to access Early Years provision;
- The COVID winter grant;
- Concern about inconsistency between schools about staff being on site and that teachers were being treated differently from other schools staff; and
- The inappropriate use of laptops provided to pupils, that the cost to individual schools of purchasing software to prevent this was very expensive and whether the Council could facilitate a large-scale purchase of this software at a lower cost.

A Member who was a Primary School Teacher Representative outlined the challenges schools had faced regarding the number of children who were eligible to access on-site learning during lockdown, advising that headteachers had had to make difficult decisions, taking into account the needs of vulnerable children and staff safety. She also informed Members how children learning at home were being supported by schools, including schools loaning laptops, helping parents to access Google Classroom on a range of devices, providing paper copies of work where necessary, monitoring how families were managing with remote learning, having screen free days and providing certificates and postcards to pupils to help to motivate them. She highlighted that children were still receiving an education during this period and that the area that they would most need to catch up on post-lockdown was their social and mental well-being.

The Director of Education advised that most schools had been able to meet demand for on-site places for the children of critical workers but that there were four schools where the level of demand had been very challenging and headteachers had had to make decisions, taking into account a number of factors, for example, that staff also had to provide remote learning to pupils who were not on site and the number of staff who were able to come into school each day, as some were Clinically Extremely Vulnerable and some had to self-isolate. She reported that schools were offering on-site provision for vulnerable children, including those who they had identified as not having coped well with being at home during the first lockdown and those who could not access remote learning. She confirmed that schools were monitoring whether pupils were accessing remote learning and that some pupils had been asked to come back on site because they were not accessing the remote learning. She advised Members that the data on the number of pupils who had tested positive for COVID-19 was provided by Public Health and that she would ask whether it was possible to provide this information broken down by ethnicity.

The Director of Education reported that a high number of private, voluntary and independent sector early years settings in the city were open and that she was not aware of any issue with children getting places but that she would look into this. She advised that early years settings would be experiencing the same issues as schools in terms of staff availability and that there were strict staff to children ratios in this sector.

In response to a Member's question, the Director of Education reported that arrangements had been put in place for COVID-19 tests for staff at schools and settings in the area where the COVID-19 variant of concern had been identified. In response to another question, she informed the Committee that there was no update as yet on the plans for summer examinations, including vocational qualifications.

The Director of Education informed the Committee that a reminder had been sent out to schools earlier this week about the COVID winter grant and how they could refer families for this and that her service would continue to remind staff, schools and settings about this. The Deputy Director of Children's Services reported that 291 payments had been made from this fund, in relation to 422 children. He advised that the grant system had only been in place for two weeks but that he supported work to re-publicise this. In response to a Member's question, the Executive Member for Children and Schools confirmed that the COVID winter grant could be used to help families with obtaining internet access.

The Executive Member for Children and Schools reported that the Council had been meeting regularly with trade unions which represented teachers and other schools staff and that the issue of equal treatment between different staff groups had been raised. He informed Members that the Council had made clear its position that all staff should be given equal consideration and that, where staff were able to work from home, they should be allowed to; however, schools had highlighted the additional difficulties they were facing due to more children being on site during this lockdown than during the first lockdown. He reported that trade unions could contact the Council's HR specialist advisers who were liaising with schools regarding any issues.

In response to a Member's question on the use of Lateral Flow Tests in secondary schools and colleges, the Director of Education reported that the Department for Education was supplying these directly to schools, along with guidance on their use. She advised that schools were currently using these to test staff and that some were using them to test pupils who were coming on site but that schools did have some concerns about the logistics of the testing once they had high numbers of pupils on site. In response to a question about childminders, she informed the Committee that children who were with childminders during the day would be expected to access remote learning from their school, as they would if they were at home with their family. She reported that she would look into the issue raised about centrally sourcing software for laptops provided to children and young people to ensure that they were not accessing inappropriate material.

Decision

To thank schools staff and officers in the Directorate for their hard work and to ask the Strategic Director for Children and Education Services and the Director of Education to pass on the Committee's thanks.

[Councillor Alijah declared a personal interest as the parent of a nursery-age child who did not have nursery place.]

CYP/21/08 Children and Education Services Budget 2021/22 **CYP/21/09 School Budget 2021/22**

The Committee received two reports of the Strategic Director for Children and Education Services. The first report provided updated Children and Education Services 2021/22 budget proposals that reflected the feedback and decisions from the scrutiny and Executive meetings that were held in January 2021. The second report provided a summary of the confirmed Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) allocation from the 2021/22 settlement announced on the 17 December 2020 and the budget allocation across individual school budgets and the Council's retained schools budgets which was reported to the Schools Forum on 18 January 2021.

The main points and themes within the Children and Education Services Budget report included:

- Background and context;
- Revenue Strategy;
- Directorate Revenue Budget 2021/22;
- Our Corporate Plan and Business Plan;
- Impact on Workforce, Residents, Risk Management and Legal Considerations; and
- Consultation.

The main points and themes within the School Budget report included:

- DSG 2021/22 settlement;
- Distribution of the grant across educational establishments and Council retained budgets; and

- High needs pressures.

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

- To thank the Executive for taking on board the Committee's concerns about the proposal for the revised parenting commission and to welcome that this proposal had been removed;
- Concern about the longer-term impact of the pandemic on the Council's budget and on children and families;
- Trends in terms of the number of Looked After Children (Our Children) and the associated costs of placements; and
- The impact of the proposed cut to funding for interventions to support the improvement of maintained schools.

The Strategic Director for Children and Education Services informed the Committee that none of the proposals were without risk but that officers had tried to manage and mitigate that risk and were working within a clear strategy of early intervention and improved, targeted commissioning to avoid higher costs later on. He advised that it was difficult to predict future trends, particularly the long-term impact of COVID-19, and that relatively small changes in the number of children who were Looked After, particularly those requiring external residential provision, would have a large impact on the budget. He informed Members that significant savings had already been made due to a reduction in the number of Our Children who were placed in external residential provision. He reported that, since the start of the pandemic, there had been an increase in requests for Early Help and lower level interventions and that steps were being taken to strengthen this area which, he advised, should help to prevent the escalation of needs to the point where statutory intervention was required. He outlined how the budget from the decommissioned Families First service had been reinvested to strengthen early intervention. He suggested that the Committee scrutinise the service's work on the key areas of early intervention, prevention and care planning over the next 12 to 18 months to assess how much impact this work was having. He advised that the number of children becoming Looked After had decreased and that this was likely to be because the service's strategy was working; however, he recognised that there were unknown factors, particularly with so many children not being in school, although he advised that schools were working very hard to engage with children who were not in school and that decisions had been taken to enable vulnerable children to attend school during lockdown.

In response to a Member's question, the Director of Education clarified that the proposal at 4.36 in the report related to interventions where there was a concern about a maintained school and did not affect the grants which schools received to fund work around subjects such as Physical Education and Music.

Decisions

1. To thank the Executive for taking on board the Committee's views about the proposal for the revised parenting commission.

2. To express concern at the current financial situation which necessitates these budget reductions and the lack of certainty over the Council's future position and to note that it is hoped that next year the Council will be able to set a longer-term budget to enable the service to plan more effectively for the longer term.

[Ms Samantha Barnwell declared a personal interest as a member of the Manchester Parent Carer Forum.]

CYP/21/10 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 drew Members' attention to the items on the agenda for the March meeting. He informed the Committee that he would not be standing for re-election in May so the March meeting was due to be his last meeting. On behalf of the Committee, a Member thanked the Chair for the way he had chaired the Committee over the previous three years.

Decision

To note the report and agree the work programme.