

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 10 November 2021

Present:

Councillor Reid – in the Chair
Councillors Abdullatif, Alijah, Bano, Collins, Cooley, Foley, Hewitson, Lovecy, McHale, Nunney and Sadler

Co-opted Voting Members:

Ms Z Derraz, Parent Governor Representative

Co-opted Non-Voting Members:

Mr L Duffy, Secondary Sector Teacher Representative

Also present:

Councillor Craig, Deputy Leader (Finance)
Councillor Bridges, Executive Member for Children's Services

CYP/21/50 Minutes

Decision

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

CYP/21/51 Children and Education Services Directorate Budget 2022/23

The Committee received a report of the Strategic Director of Children and Education Services which stated that, following the Spending Review announcements and other updates, the Council was forecasting an estimated shortfall of £4m in 2022/23, £64m in 2023/24 and £85m by 2024/25. This report set out the high-level position. Officers had identified options to balance the budget in 2022/23 which were subject to approval.

The main points and themes within the report included:

- Current budget position;
- Headline priorities for the service;
- Indicative revenue budget; and
- Capital budget and pipeline priorities.

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

- The likelihood of getting any government grants to assist with decarbonisation, to ask that the report on climate change and schools which had been requested for the January meeting include whether funding would be available to help schools with this and also a request for an update on retrofitting and solar panels;

- Home school transport;
- That the Council should look at schools which were underspending on their budget;
- Concern about the underfunding of the High Needs Block from the Government; and
- To recognise the progress that had been made by Children's Services, including fewer children coming into care, which was beneficial for the children and for the service's budget.

The Chair suggested that the Committee receive a report on Home School Transport at a future meeting. The Director of Education explained the eligibility criteria for Home School Transport and the challenges facing this provision. She advised that the Council would be reviewing its policy on this in co-production with parents and carers. The Chair also requested that the Committee receive a report on homeless families being placed in bed and breakfast accommodation outside of the city and the impact of this, such as the higher costs of home school transport.

The Director of Education advised that there were a number of individual grants available to schools relating to decarbonisation and that the Council was undertaking a piece of work which included bringing all that information together in one place. She informed the Committee about a report being considered at the next meeting of the Schools Forum on undertaking condition surveys of school buildings for local authority-maintained schools, including factors such as energy efficiency. She advised that this would be a basis from which the Council could understand the current position and look at how the capital maintenance budget could be used most effectively and could also be used to provide targeted advice to schools on grants that they could apply for to undertake the work identified by the survey.

The Deputy Director of Children's Services recognised the improvements in quality of practice while also drawing Members' attention to challenges from an increasing population, the number of children needing referral from Early Help into statutory services and the medium to long term impacts from the pandemic.

Decisions

1. To request a report on Home School Transport.
2. To request a report on homeless families, in particular families being placed outside of the city and the impact of this.

CYP/21/52 Adoption Counts – Regional Adoption Agency

The Committee received a report of the Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) which sought approval to formally and permanently transfer staff from Manchester into Stockport Council (the host organisation) under TUPE regulations. The report explained that in 2015, the Government had announced its intention to legislate to ensure that all local authority adoption services had merged with neighbouring services to form larger regional adoption agencies (RAA) and that, in 2017, the Senior Management Team (SMT), Executive Member for Children's and Education Services and Executive had supported a proposal from the Strategic

Director of Children's Services for Manchester's adoption service to merge with four other local authorities (Stockport, Trafford, Salford, and Cheshire East) and two voluntary adoption agencies (Adoption Matters and Caritas) to form a regional adoption agency which was known as 'Adoption Counts'. It stated that Stockport had been nominated as the host organisation for the regional adoption agency, and it was agreed in 2017 to temporarily second adoption staff from Manchester, Trafford, Salford and Cheshire East into Stockport whilst the RAA was established and developed.

The main points and themes within the report included:

- Objectives of the Regional Adoption Agency;
- The structure of the Regional Adoption Agency;
- Reporting and governance;
- Performance of the Regional Adoption Agency;
- Workforce implications;
- Legal implications - contractual arrangements;
- Information Technology;
- Commissioning;
- Risks/mitigation; and
- Financial implications.

The Executive Member for Children's Services advised that information appeared to demonstrate that Adoption Counts was delivering positive outcomes for Manchester's children and that it, therefore, made sense to move to these more formal arrangements.

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

- The benefits of a regional adoption agency which broadened the search for suitable adoptive parents for Our Children;
- Whether staff's views would be taken into consideration, given that the staff consultation was taking place after Executive approval had been sought; and
- Whether Manchester staff would need to adapt to a different work culture if they transferred to Stockport Council.

The Deputy Director of Children's Services assured Members that there was a well-established HR protocol relating to staff consultation and advised that staff concerns often related to their individual circumstances, which would be taken into consideration. He reported that Adoption Counts had been operating since 2017, with Manchester staff having been seconded to the service since then, and that staff would remain on Manchester City Council's terms and conditions so he did not anticipate that this transfer would create many cultural issues. He informed the Committee that staff could also choose not to transfer to Stockport and instead to be found an alternative position within Manchester City Council. In response to a question from the Chair, he advised that Stockport's HR and back office support had been very good, although he did not have the information on how Stockport had been chosen as the hosting organisation from 2017.

The Chair requested that the Committee receive a report on adoption at a future meeting which included what difference the move to Adoption Counts had made in providing stable adoption placements for Our Children and what happened when an adoption broke down.

Decisions

1. To receive a report on adoption at a future meeting which includes what difference the move to Adoption Counts has made in providing stable adoption placements for Our Children and what happens when an adoption breaks down.
2. To endorse the recommendation that the Executive is recommended to agree to the adoption service for MCC being integrated into the Regional Adoption Agency 'Adoption Counts', approve the transfer of the service and note that staff who are assigned to the service will transfer to Stockport under TUPE regulations.

CYP/21/53 COVID-19 Update

The Committee received a verbal update of the Director of Education which outlined new developments and significant changes to the current situation, particularly in relation to schools.

The main points and themes within the verbal update included:

- School attendance remained strong and significantly above the national average;
- The number of positive cases was relatively stable and lower than elsewhere but still a concern;
- That the Council had recommended enhanced measures in schools and colleges to reduce the risk of transmission and this would be reviewed on a fortnightly basis; and
- Arrangements for and progress with the roll-out of vaccinations for 12 to 15 year olds.

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

- Had there been any anti-vaccine protests outside schools in Manchester and what plans were in place for this;
- That some parents were not against vaccines but had some concerns about their children being vaccinated and what were the plans for providing information and reassurance to them; and
- Days of education lost due to the pandemic and the impact of this, particularly on pupils who were struggling academically or displaying behavioural problems.

In response to a Member's question about face coverings, the Director of Education

reported that schools were currently being advised that pupils should wear face coverings in communal areas but not in the classroom and that special schools had been included in this advice, although some pupils would be exempt. She stated that this advice was considered to be proportionate, based on the current situation and had been arrived at in consultation with the Director of Public Health. She reported that she was not aware of any anti-vaccine campaigns outside of Manchester schools but that schools had been sent some guidance on dealing with this if there was a protest which was creating a problem, such as causing an obstruction. She advised that a lot of information had been provided to parents about the vaccine, primarily through schools. She also advised that, while vaccines were being provided at schools, parents also had the option of having their child vaccinated at another site at a later date, to give them more time to discuss it and reach a decision. The Director of Public Health informed Members that parents had the opportunity to further discuss any concerns they had at these other vaccination sites and that they could also call the COVID-19 helpline. In response to a Member's question, he outlined the reasons for the vaccination booster programme and who was eligible for this.

The Director of Education advised that further information on the impact of the pandemic on children's education would be provided in the next agenda item but that schools were working to address this, tailored to what their pupils needed. She advised that this was partly about helping pupils to re-adjust to being back in the school routine, rather than trying to cram a lot of learning into a short space of time. A Member who was a Teacher Representative supported this comment.

In response to a Member's question, the Director of Education advised that schools were struggling with staff absences, for a range of reasons including staff testing positive with COVID-19, other illnesses, childcare issues caused by the pandemic and unvaccinated staff being close contacts of positive cases and having to self-isolate. The Chair requested that some figures on this be provided in a future update.

The Director of Education acknowledged a point from the Chair that some families were unclear on the changes in the rules which meant that other children in the household could still attend school if a family member had tested positive. She reported that information was being sent out to families but that there could also be other issues such as problems in getting a child to school if all the adults in the household had tested positive and had to self-isolate.

Members discussed ways that information could be communicated to parents, including billboards, social media and government public health campaigns. A Member emphasised the value of face-to-face meetings to communicate information on issues such as vaccines and the current rules on self-isolation. The Executive Member for Children's Services advised that work was taking place on vaccine take-up for both adults and children in Manchester and that this included a communications plan. Noting that those leading the school age vaccination programme had attended last month's meeting when this work had still been at an early stage, he suggested that they attend a future meeting to inform Members about the progress made.

Decision

To note the report.

CYP/21/54 COVID-19 in Manchester School-Age Children, and Across Manchester School Settings: a retrospective analysis of academic year 2020/21

The Committee received a report of the Director of Public Health which provided a data-driven retrospective analysis of the academic year 2020/21 in Manchester. The report explored the impact of COVID-19 on school settings across Manchester, levels of school absence, and confirmed cases in school-age children resident in the city.

The main points and themes within the report included:

- National context;
- Manchester Test and Trace;
- COVID-19 Situational Awareness Explorer; and
- Findings.

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

- Whether the new lateral flow testing kits which only required a nasal swab encouraged more people to use them;
- That it was important not to forget the impact that the pandemic had had on two years of children and young people's education as things returned to greater normality and to ensure that those who had been most affected were not disadvantaged in future; and
- The impact on children who had transitioned to high school this year and young people who had been awarded GCSE grades through teacher assessment and might be struggling with A-level or other college courses.

The Director of Education agreed that the impact of the pandemic on children and their education was a longer term issue and shared Members' concern about this not being recognised and responded to in future years. She advised Members that part of the reason for publishing the report had been to demonstrate this impact and that this information had also been shared with Manchester schools. She highlighted the impact on Early Years and school readiness and advised that this age group needed to be monitored, ensuring they were meeting developmental milestones and were given the opportunity to develop basic social skills which they might have missed out on. In response to a Member's question, she outlined the support available to Early Years settings. Regarding children entering Year 7 and post-16 education, she advised that Manchester had excellent schools and colleges which had been working hard to support children and young people transitioning during this period. She advised that, where young people were not on the right course for them, the post-16 providers supported them to find the best option for them, such as reducing the number of A-levels they were taking, changing courses or moving to a different setting, where appropriate. She reported that larger institutions also had Career Connect staff on site. She advised that schools and post-16 providers had a point of contact within the Education Service for advice and support and, where particular

themes were emerging, the service addressed this strategically. The Chair noted the number of Ofsted inspections which had been initiated in recent weeks and expressed concern about whether Ofsted would take into consideration the impact of the last two years.

The Director of Public Health informed Members that at present both the old-style and new-style tests were being used. He reported that it appeared that a lot of people were testing themselves but not recording the results online and that the easier tests and the importance of registering the results would be promoted to the public. In response to a Member's question, the Public Health Specialist (Health Intelligence) advised that the reasons some people did not record their test results included lack of IT skills and the time it took to do it, especially if you were registering results for multiple children. He advised that he would look into the data on uptake of the new-style tests in comparison to the old-style tests. The Programme Lead for Contact Tracing reported that some people did not want to register a positive test because of the requirements for self-isolation and she emphasised that there was a dedicated local team to support people who were required to self-isolate, offering financial and non-financial support for the household.

In response to a request from a Member that the communications about testing and the vaccination of children be reviewed, the Director of Public Health advised that his team would progress this, looking at how messages could be targeted more effectively. He reported they were also lobbying for better national public health campaigns. The Chair recognised the work of Neighbourhoods staff who had carried out door to door engagement with residents in areas with low vaccine take-up. A Member advised that it was important to provide information in community languages and to use social media platforms that young people used.

Decision

That the Committee will continue to look at the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on children and their education.

CYP/21/55 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 thanked Mr Duffy for his many years of service as a Co-opted Member, as this was his last meeting. She also reminded Members about the Ofsted Subgroup meeting that was taking place on 24 November 2021 and asked any other Members who wanted to join the Subgroup to let the Scrutiny Support Officer know. She advised that she would discuss the work programme with officers after the meeting.

A Member requested that report authors indicate what elements of their report related to the city's zero carbon ambitions or, where this was not relevant, state this in the Environmental Impact Assessment section of the report, to demonstrate that this had been considered.

Decision

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