

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2024

Present:

Councillor Reid – in the Chair

Councillors N Ali, Alijah, Amin, Gartside, Hewitson, Lovecy, Ludford, McHale, Marsh, and Nunney

Co-opted Voting Members:

Mr G Cleworth, Parent Governor Representative

Ms S Davies, Parent Governor Representative

Canon S Mapledoram, Representative of the Diocese of Manchester

Mr Y Yonis, Parent Governor Representative

Also present:

Councillor Akbar, Executive Member for Finance and Resources

Councillor Bridges, Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People

Apologies:

Councillors Fletcher and Judge

CYP/24/08 Minutes

Decision

To approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 10 January 2024.

CYP/24/09 Revenue Budget Update 2024/25

The Committee received a report of the Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer which provided a high-level overview of the updated budget position. It set out the latest forecast revenue budget position, and the next steps. Following the Provisional Finance Settlement announced on 18 December 2023, the Council was forecasting an estimated budget shortfall of £38m in 2024/25, £79m in 2025/26, and £90m by 2026/27. After the application of approved and planned savings, and the use of c.£17m smoothing reserves in each of the three years, the budget was balanced for 2024/25 and the remaining gap reduced to £29m in 2025/26 and £41m by 2026/27. This position assumed that savings of £21.4m were delivered next year.

Key points and themes within the report included:

- Changes to the budget position;
- Summary budget position;
- Budget consultation;
- Equalities impact and anti-poverty assessments;
- Scrutiny of the draft proposals and the budget reports; and
- Next steps.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources stated that the Government's approach to the Local Government Settlement had been chaotic and only announced just before Christmas. He reported that the final announcement had resulted in a cut of 84% in the Services Grant and that this equated to a £6.1m cut for Manchester. He stated that this had resulted in an outcry from local authorities and MPs from all political parties. He stated that this situation needed to be understood in the context of 14 years of austerity and Government funding cuts and unfunded pressures such as inflation and population growth.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources added that the Government had then announced an additional £500m for Social Care; however, local authorities were still facing a £4bn budget gap nationally, resulting in a number of local authorities serving a Section 144 notice and it was anticipated that more would follow.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources commented that, despite this, Manchester had set a balanced budget and this had been achieved through diligent planning and management that had seen strategic investment in preventative initiatives; using financial reserves prudently and investment in activities that were important for Manchester residents, such as libraries; leisure centres, highways, parks and green spaces and reducing the carbon footprint.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources stated that although Manchester had been able to deliver a balanced budget this year, the Council's financial position was expected to become even more challenging. The projected budget gap, even after using reserves for 25/26, was £29m in 2025/26 and £41m in 2026/27. He expressed concern that the Government had continually failed to listen to local authorities.

Decision

To note the forecast medium term revenue budget.

CYP/24/10 Children and Education Services Budget 2024/25

The Committee considered a report of the Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) which provided a further update on the priorities for the services in the remit of this Committee and detailed the changes to the initial revenue budget options proposed by officers in November 2023. The Committee was invited to consider the proposed budget changes that were within its remit and to make recommendations to the Executive before it agreed to the final budget proposals on 14 February 2024.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Service overview and priorities;
- Service budget and proposed changes;
- Workforce implications; and
- Use of reserves and grants.

The Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People reported that the Council had been in a difficult financial position for the last 14 years due to Government cuts but had continued to prioritise children and had invested in a range of successful innovations, such as Early Help and Edge of Care services. He informed Members that, excepting Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, the number of Looked After Children in Manchester had decreased, which was contrary to the national trend and demonstrated the success of early intervention, providing support to families so that more children could safely remain with their families. He expressed concern about profiteering in the private placement sector and about the impact of the withdrawal of the Household Support Fund. He stated that the Council would continue to invest in Children's Services, highlighting investment in a range of areas including Youth Services, Sure Start and work to become a Child Friendly City.

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

- To thank officers for their work in making the most of the funding available to support children and families, in the face of continuing Government cuts, which restricted what could be done;
- To support the continuing use of the early intervention approach which had worked successfully over recent years;
- Concern about the challenges facing families, including increased use of Section 21 eviction notices and the removal of the Holiday Activity Fund, and the increased pressures on schools in trying to support these families; and
- The importance of providing Home To School transport for children with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and to ask for further information on the proposals for the service, including the new route planning software.

The Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) reported that, while the Council and its partners, including schools and health partners, were all facing challenges, they were continuing to focus on partnership working to support children and families. He informed Members about the refresh of the Children and Young People's Plan, one key area of which would be poverty. He advised that there was a focus on getting the maximum amount of impact and efficiency from services, rather than reducing services.

The Director of Education reported that an additional £3.9 million was being invested in Home To School Transport over the next three years, in recognition of the growing demand for the service and increased pressures; however, she advised that the Council was seeking to make the service more efficient, through route planning software and commissioning. She reported that route planning had previously been carried out manually by staff but that the software would enable more efficient routes to be identified and for buses to be fully utilised. She also highlighted the new policy which had been introduced the previous year, and which had been considered by the Committee at that time, which included a range of other options for eligible children, such as a personal budget for the family to use to arrange transport. She informed Members about an audit tool that was being developed to help schools to poverty-proof the school day and suggested that the Committee could receive a report on the work taking place at a future meeting.

The Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People reported that the increasing cost of Home To School transport was a serious problem for local authorities across the country but that the Council had invested in this area and worked across different departments, including ICT and HR, to find solutions.

The Chair informed Members about the improvement journey that Children's Services had been on since 2014, when it had been judged to be inadequate by Ofsted. She highlighted that in 2010 the Council had lost 4000 staff due to the cuts to local government budgets. She praised the work that had taken place to get Children's Services to its current position, improving the lives of children and young people while also saving money, particularly through the implementation of new approaches to safely reduce the number of Looked After Children. However, she expressed concern that the ongoing cuts being imposed by the current Government were unsustainable.

Decision

To note the proposed changes which are relevant to the Committee's remit.

CYP/24/11 Dedicated Schools Grant 2024/25

The Committee considered a report of the Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) which provided a summary of the confirmed DSG allocation from the 2024/25 settlement announced on 19 December 2024 and the budget allocation across individual school budgets and Council's retained schools budgets which was consulted and reported to Schools Forum on 15 January 2024.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Grant overview;
- Distribution across educational establishments and Council issues; and
- DSG medium term financial planning.

The Chair highlighted the pressure on the High Needs Block and reported that money was being recovered from some schools which had built up a large balance. She expressed concern about how some academy trusts managed their budgets. She informed Members that the provision of school buses was being reviewed.

In response to a question from the Chair, the Head of Finance (Children, Education and Schools) explained how the DSG from the Department for Education (DfE) was allocated, with most of it being distributed to schools, who were responsible for their own budgets, and a smaller amount being retained by the Council for the High Needs Block, which was distributed to schools during the year in relation to support for children with SEND. She reported that, following agreement from the Schools Forum, the approach to monitoring and recovering money from schools with surplus balances was being tightened up, with that money being used to address pressures in the High Needs Block.

The Director of Education reported that Early Years settings were also funded through the DSG and that this amount had increased due to the expanded entitlement to free childcare which was being introduced. The Chair expressed concern that the Early Years Block allocation from the DfE, as set out in table 5 of the report, was insufficient and that the sector would struggle to provide sufficiency of places when the entitlement was expanded. The Lead for Statutory Area (Early Years Access and Sufficiency) outlined some of the work the Council was doing to help the Early Years sector prepare for these changes. The Chair reported that sufficiency of places would be considered in a future Early Years report and she encouraged Members to monitor issues with this in their ward.

In relation to the High Needs Block, a Member informed the Committee about a recent visit that Members of the Ofsted Subgroup had undertaken to a new special school in the north of the city, where children were receiving the care and support they needed, and she highlighted the importance of ensuring that children with SEND were provided with the right support and environment, in specialist or mainstream provision, to enable them to achieve their potential. The Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People suggested that the Committee receive a report on work taking place to provide better options for children with SEND, noting that for some children this would be in mainstream schools and that some children with more complex needs would require special school places. The Chair agreed to receive a report on this.

The Chair expressed concern that the Government was not covering the costs of the problems with Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) which some schools were facing. She also expressed concern about the condition of many primary school buildings, stating that investment was needed in new school buildings but that the Coalition Government had cancelled the Building Schools for the Future programme in 2010, with the Council managing to obtain sign-off on The Grange shortly before the programme was cancelled.

In response to the Chair's comments, the Director of Education reported that there had been one school in Manchester with RAAC but that there were other concerns about the condition of school buildings in the city. She drew Members' attention to a section in the previous report (Children and Education Services Budget 2024/25) regarding funding which had been allocated to complete condition surveys of local authority-maintained schools, advising that these would assist with bids for any relevant funding which became available and would also inform how the capital maintenance grant was allocated.

Decisions

1. To note the report.
2. To consider sufficiency of Early Years places in a future report.
3. To receive a report on work taking place to provide improved options, in both mainstream and special schools, for children with SEND.

CYP/24/12 Update on Progress of the Leaving Care Service

The Committee considered a report and presentation of the Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) which provided an update on Manchester's approach to supporting its Care Leavers.

Key points and themes in the report and presentation included:

- Demographic;
- Performance;
- Accommodation;
- Education, training and employment;
- Emotional, mental, physical and sexual health;
- Strengths and developments; and
- Next steps.

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

- To welcome the work being done, including the proactive approach, listening to the voices of young people and the level of contact with Care Leavers;
- Supporting young people with neuro-behavioural conditions, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) and trauma; and
- Adapting to the needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people including friendships and community connections and noting that this group was predominantly male.

In response to a question from the Chair, the Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) explained how bringing the service in-house enabled the Council to shape the culture and behaviour of how the service was delivered, creating a culture which encouraged innovation, rather than just compliance. In response to a further question from the Chair about whether this could be run as a service which other local authorities could buy into, he reported that consideration was given to what could be exported. He informed Members that good practice and learning was shared through the Greater Manchester Care Leavers Trust Board.

The Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People reported that a lot of work had taken place in relation to FASD, after this had been raised at previous Committee meetings, including the Director of Public Health setting up a roundtable on this issue, involving a wide range of partners.

The Deputy Strategic Director of Children's Services informed the Committee about the 'Beyond Psychology' trauma-informed practice training which all the service's Personal Advisors had undertaken. He reported that the service had been designed in a way which recognised the diverse impact of trauma and FASD on young people's lives and how the service could effectively engage with those young people.

The Assistant Director (Children in Care and Care Leavers) reported that it could be a long process for a neurodiverse young adult who had not been diagnosed in childhood to receive a diagnosis so her service was focusing on dealing with the

presenting behaviours and not delaying pathway planning while awaiting a diagnosis, being aspirational for each young person and understanding them as an individual. She outlined work with Youth Justice on the SHIFT programme and work which was taking place on transitional safeguarding to support young people who did not meet the criteria of the Care Act assessment. She reported that, following feedback from a young person, her service was looking into making the 'Beyond Psychology' training available to some older young people to help them understand their cognitive processes and self-help approaches.

In response to a Member's question on the Southwark Ruling, the Deputy Strategic Director of Children's Services reported that, while he did not have the exact figures to hand and would provide these after the meeting, the trend in Manchester had changed significantly in recent years from 80% of 16- and 17-year-olds who presented as homeless coming into care and 20% returning to their families to 20% coming into care and 80% returning to their families, due to a new approach to supporting and engaging with families.

In response to a question about Kinship Carers, the Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People suggested that the Committee might want to receive a report on this at a future meeting, to which the Chair agreed.

The Chair commented on the 13 young people who were in custody. She informed Members about a visit to Wetherby Young Offenders Institute which had taken place in conjunction with the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee. She expressed concern that Barton Moss Secure Children's Centre had not agreed for Members to visit.

The Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People highlighted the positive work that the Youth Justice Service and SHIFT team were doing and suggested that the Committee might want to visit them in future.

The Assistant Director (Children in Care and Care Leavers) reported that the service had recruited a number of male Personal Advisers, who were able to provide male role models. She advised that the housing band one model had been expanded to include shared accommodation, which could be particularly useful for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people who had travelled together and lived together. She clarified that young people who had been the subject of Special Guardianship Order (SGO) or had been privately fostered were still classed as Care Leavers and that young people in this position were starting to be aware of the Leaving Care Service and approaching them for support. In response to a Member's question, she confirmed that the service wanted to diversify its Care Consultants and was doing targeted work to recruit Care Consultants who had been through the Youth Justice system and young people who were unaccompanied asylum-seekers. In response to a question from the Chair about 'suitable accommodation', she advised that unsuitable accommodation was defined by the Department for Education (DfE) as bed-and-breakfast accommodation or custody, stating that none of their young Care Leavers were in bed-and-breakfast accommodation. She informed Members about targeted work her service had been doing with HMP Hindley and Barton Moss Secure Children's Centre to support Manchester's young Care Leavers who were in custody.

In response to a Member's question about the cultural background of Care Leavers, the Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) drew Members' attention to the pie chart on ethnicity on the second page of the presentation and stated that additional information, such as religion, was also available. He assured Members that one of Children's Services' priorities was to be sensitive and responsive to children and young people's identity.

Decision

To receive a report on Kinship Carers at a future meeting.

CYP/24/13 Update on the Government's Strategy to Reform Children's Services (Stable Homes, Built on Love)

The Committee considered a report and presentation of the Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) which provided an overview of the Government's strategy for the reform of children's services and the implications for Manchester.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- The six strategic pillars of Stable Homes, Built on Love and the phased approach to reform;
- The National Kinship Care Strategy;
- The Children's Social Care National Framework;
- The multi-agency statutory guidance Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023; and
- The national digital and data strategy, which included a proposed National Children's Social Care Dashboard.

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

- Concern that there was no certainty of funding for these reforms;
- How much confidence was there that Manchester could implement these reforms on time;
- Kinship Carers and private fostering, including ensuring that families were getting the support they needed; and
- The selection of eight Local Authorities to take part in the Kinship Care pilots.

The Chair informed Members of the work of MP Andrew Gwynne on Kinship Carers. She highlighted the role of multi-agency working, including the police, in relation to complex safeguarding and informed Members about place-based multi-agency work in her ward to address complex safeguarding concerns.

In response to the Chair's comments, the Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People advised that Ward Councillors for an importance source of intelligence on what was happening in their ward and he encouraged Ward Councillors to share any concerns they had so that they could be addressed.

The Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) reported that, while the Council was still awaiting further details of the reforms from the Government, it had already invested in some of the key areas and would respond innovatively and creatively to meet these new challenges. He advised that the Council should be provided with funding from central Government for new burdens placed upon it. He reported that there had been no announcement from the DfE as yet on the eight Local Authorities which would participate in the Kinship Care pilots and that Manchester already paid its Kinship Carers comparable rates to Foster Carers.

The Head of Service Provider Services reported that approximately 20% of Looked After Children in Manchester lived with Kinship Carers, under the current definition of this term. She reported that 666 children were subject to Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) and 236 lived in kinship fostering arrangements. She outlined the support that was now available for Special Guardians including training, designated support groups and access to the Adoption Support Fund and highlighted the benefits for children of living with extended family. She reported that the disruption rate was lower for Kinship Carers and had decreased further as the support offer had been improved. She informed Members that the Council had achieved Fostering Friendly Status as an employer.

In response to comments from the Chair about having 'great' Social Workers, the Deputy Strategic Director of Children's Services suggested that the Committee receive a report on the updated Children's Services Workforce Development Strategy at a future meeting, to which the Chair agreed. The Chair reported that Members would be visiting frontline Social Workers to ensure that they had an accurate understanding of the situation.

Decisions

1. To note the report and seek further updates on progress for each specific area of reform, to be included in the Committee's work programme for 2024/25.
2. To receive a report on the updated Children's Services Workforce Development Strategy at a future meeting.

CYP/24/14 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.

A Member who was the Chair of the Ofsted Subgroup invited Committee Members to join the Subgroup.

Decision

To note the report and agree the work programme.