

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 6 November 2024

Present:

Councillor E Bell – in the Chair

Councillors N Ali, Amin, Collins, Fletcher, Gartside, Lovecy, Mandongwe, Muse and Nunney

Co-opted Voting Members:

Mr Y Yonis, Parent Governor Representative

Also present:

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

Gail Spray, Adoption Counts

Alice Taylor, Adoption Counts

Apologies:

Councillors Foley and McHale

Mr G Cleworth, Parent Governor Representative

Ms S Davies, Parent Governor Representative

Canon S Mapledoram, Representative of the Diocese of Manchester

CYP/24/51 Interests

Councillor Mandongwe declared a personal interest as a trustee of the Dimobi Children's Disability Trust and stated that she would declare any conflicts of interests during the meeting and recuse herself from any related decisions.

CYP/24/52 Minutes

Decision

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9 October 2024 be approved as a correct record.

CYP/24/53 Dedicated Schools Grant - Children and Education Services Budget 2025/26

The Committee considered the report of the Acting Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) which provided a progress update on Manchester's high needs block recovery plan.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) support;
- High Needs Block (HNB) forecast;
- Update on HNB recovery actions; and
- Schools Block transfer consultation for 2025/26 budget setting.

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

- Concern at the level of overspend in the HNB;
- Request for clarification on the impact of the announcements in the Government's Autumn Statement in relation to schools and SEND;
- Challenges in meeting the needs of children with SEND and strategies to ensure resources were allocated efficiently to meet the needs of children and young people;
- Specialist SEND units in mainstream schools;
- Delays in obtaining an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP);
- Challenges for schools, including supporting children who were waiting for a diagnosis, and the importance of the Council working in partnership with schools; and
- The importance of remembering the child's voice.

The Assistant Finance Director (Children's, Education Services and Schools) informed Members that the additional funding for the HNB was £1 billion nationally and it was estimated that Manchester would receive approximately £10 million, although this was not confirmed yet. She reported that the Council had previously assumed that it would receive about £6 million so this additional £4 million would help but would not be sufficient to address the gap, which was around £30 million so there was still a need to transfer funds from the Schools Block into the HNB. She reported that the additional money would mainly go to settings and that this would be in the 2025/26 budget.

In response to a Member's question, the Director of Education clarified that, where children were on a waiting list for health services for a significant period of time, EHCPs were being requested so that the child could still access interventions and that requests for EHCPs were being used as a means to get assessments. She reported that the main challenges creating pressures on demand in relation to children with SEND was in Early Years, where the main need related to speech, language and communication, at transition from primary to secondary where there was an increase in pupils with Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) difficulties and in education for 19 to 25-year-olds with SEND. She advised that resources were being targeted into these areas, highlighting the Kickstarter Project which the Committee had considered at the previous meeting, the SAFE Project in secondary schools, working with children with SEMH needs, mentoring for pupils in Year 6 who it had been identified might struggle with the transition from primary to secondary, a project to help schools to become neurodiverse friendly and post-19 transition work, for example, increasing supported internships. She advised that obtaining grant funding had been important to enable the Council to invest in these areas and try to reduce spending on the HNB. She reported that the main focus was on developing effective, inclusive mainstream schools, advising that some of the barriers to this were the current curriculum and assessment and Ofsted's measurement of school performance. She advised that there was now capacity in mainstream primary schools, meaning that specialist provision could be set up in these schools, with much smaller classes and a different curriculum, and that special school places could be allocated to children with very high levels of needs who required specialist facilities. She reported that the Council had shared its recovery

plan with the Department for Education (DfE) and the Education Funding Agency, which had both agreed that it was an effective plan. She advised that the next area for more focused work was post-19 provision.

The Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People reported that the issues in relation to the HNB had been going on for many years and were growing and that this was a national issue, although Manchester was disproportionately affected. She advised that the new Government had responded to this issue but it was still not enough so Manchester schools had been asked to top slice their budgets so that the money could be transferred to the HNB. She highlighted that the HNB had to meet the needs of children and young people up to the age of 25 and that a high proportion of available funding was allocated to a small number of children with very high levels of need.

The Director of Education clarified that there was no waiting list for EHCPs within the Council. She reported that, following a request for an assessment by either a school, parent or professional, a decision was made on whether an assessment was needed or not, based on a threshold set out in legislation, and, if it was, there was a 20-week timescale for the Council to complete the EHCP process. She advised that Manchester's compliance rate with this timescale was 75% and that a lot of the delays were due to waiting for information and advice from other agencies. In response to Members' comments, she recognised that schools were facing increased levels of need and advised that her service was doing a lot of work with schools to support this. She informed Members about the analysis which her service was doing on levels of SEND in different schools and which schools were doing well at meeting the needs of all of their pupils and advised that work was now taking place on sharing best practice and pairing schools who were doing well with supporting pupils with SEND with ones which were struggling. In response to a question about the Changemakers Group, she advised that they came to the SEND Board on at least a quarterly basis and influenced decision-making.

The Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People praised the work of the EHCP team, who she advised had recently won an award and whose workload had doubled, while only having the same number of officers. She highlighted the pressures on teachers in mainstream schools who were now teaching more pupils with a range of SEND, while advising that children should go to a school in their local community, wherever possible.

Decision

To note the report and the work done to date.

CYP/24/54 Annual Adoption Report

The Committee considered the report and presentation of the Head of Service (Adoption Counts) which outlined the performance of Adoption Counts in relation to numbers and timescales for children with a plan of adoption, Manchester's priorities relating to adoption, adopter recruitment and adoption support.

Key points and themes in the report and presentation included:

- Outcomes for children;
- Quality of reports;
- Marketing and recruitment of adopters;
- Practice developments in Adoption Counts;
- Adoption Panel; and
- Adoption support.

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

- Concern about delays in the system;
- What would the average time from entering care to adoptive placement have been if the one child with a particularly high period of 1,820 days was removed from the figures;
- Reducing the need for children to be adopted;
- Kinship Carers;
- Adoption support;
- Retention of staff and support for staff;
- Request for figures to be broken down by ethnicity; and
- Recruitment of adopters, particularly from black and ethnic minority communities.

Gail Spray from Adoption Counts confirmed that the service's figures for the average time from entering care to adoptive placement would be within the national average if the one child for whom this was 1,820 days was excluded from the data. In response to a Member's question, she advised that this specific child was in a settled placement, following an adoption breakdown, and was receiving a significant amount of support and work was taking place to identify where the child's needs would best be met. She reported that Adoption Counts had a strong and experienced management team and that staff retention was good due to the organisation's structure and focus on emotional well-being, advising that annual well-being surveys were carried and any relevant changes identified in these were implemented. She reported that a breakdown of data by ethnicity was available, advising that Manchester had eight global majority children with a plan for adoption out of around 22 children who were waiting, that the number of global majority children was higher than the other local authorities within the regional adoption agency and so Manchester had more children who were likely to wait longer. In response to a Member's question, she reported that exit interviews were carried out with people who decided not to proceed further after making an enquiry, advising that sometimes people enquired about adoption when they were not yet ready to proceed but that having contact with Adoption Counts at that stage would mean that they would have the agency in mind when they were ready to make that step. She reported that social media was now the top method for recruiting potential adopters, with word of mouth also being popular. She advised that the agency needed to target global majority families and informed Members about work to address this, including identifying barriers to approaching the agency and making a podcast with a black adopter talking about their experience to dispel myths. She advised that in-person events were less successful in generating interest than anticipated so social media

and redesigning the agency's website were being focused on. In response to a Member's question, she outlined how Adoption Counts had worked to improve the diversity of its Adoption Panels.

The Chair commented that the process of becoming a foster carer or adoptive parent was intrusive but that it was necessary to keep children safe.

The Acting Deputy Director of Children's Services informed Members that the Council was guided by national legislation to try to support children within their families and extended families, highlighting the investment in early intervention and prevention to keep children with their families and, where it was not possible for children to live with their parents, to try to identify carers within their extended family or community, stating that this was a growth area for fostering services. She reported that the Council had expanded its family group conferencing service to try to identify potential connected carers at an earlier stage and emphasised the importance of wider support services to make these placements work. She reported that performance in relation to the adoption of global majority children had improved but a particular challenge was the placement of sibling groups and she informed Members that targeted recruitment was taking place in relation to this.

The Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People advised that the Council tried to keep children at home, where possible, or with kinship carers and that Andrew Gwynne MP had been raising the rights of and allowances for Kinship Carers in Parliament.

Alice Taylor from Adoption Counts reported that her agency made a significant number of applications to the Adoption Support Fund and that it was of great benefit to the families, although there were sometimes issues for families due to the time it took for applications to be approved and because some therapies were not in the scope of the Fund. She reported that this Fund was guaranteed until next year and it was hoped that it would continue to be available for families. In response to a Member's question, she advised that Adoption Support Social Workers did have high caseloads and she outlined work to address this through a closure and exit policy.

In response to a Member's question about the recently announced trialling of a kinship allowance with 10 local authorities, the Acting Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) advised that the details of this were not yet known.

In response to a Member's question about the quality of child permanence reports, Gail Spray reported that these had significantly improved due to the relationship between the agency's family finders and the child's Social Worker, with the agency supporting the Social Worker in completing these and delivering training to Social Workers who were new to the local authority and those with little or no experience of adoption. The Acting Deputy Director of Children's Services reported that the Council also had its own internal quality assurance process.

Decision

To note the progress and outcomes outlined in the report and to endorse the priorities relating to adoption.

CYP/24/55

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.

Decision

To note the report and agree the work programme.