

CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

TUESDAY, 29 JANUARY 2019

PRESENT: Councillors Eileen Quick (Chairman), Marion Mills (Vice-Chairman), Sayonara Luxton, Nicola Pryer, Edward Wilson and Wesley Richards

Also in attendance: Councillor Natasha Airey

Officers: Kevin McDaniel, Hilary Hall, Andy Carswell and Russell O'Keefe

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr Richards, who would be late arriving to the meeting.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

MINUTES

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on December 6th 2018 be approved as a true and correct record, subject to an amendment to note Cllr Mrs Airey's apologies.

BUDGET 2019/20

The Director of Children's Services explained to Members that expenditure on statutory children's services had increased, in common with other local authorities, and there had been an overspend in the current financial year. However there had been an increase in the base budget for 2019/20, which reflected the Council's high priority to providing child safeguarding services. There was a proposed gross investment of £4.3million for children's services for the forthcoming financial year, although areas where savings could be made had been also been identified. These included reductions in spending on agency staff, and a proportionate saving related to costs of placements for children outside of the Royal Borough.

The Chairman asked the Director of Children's Services if he was satisfied that the mitigations in place in the current year were sufficient to deliver the children's services budget. The Director of Children's Services stated that significant additional costs to help support the budget were still to be recouped, including a provider backdating the cost of some out of Borough care placements. He added that other savings had been made and identified, and that he was confident the forecast outturn position was achievable.

The Chairman noted there was a significant cost difference between placement of a child with a foster family against an out of Borough placement. The Director of Children's Services said it was difficult to draw a direct comparison as local placements may incur additional costs, such as for therapeutic support which are often included in the out of borough placement costs. These were reviewed on a regular basis to ensure the therapy was appropriate.

Cllr Wilson noted that the budget for Achieving for Children had increased from £15million in 2017/18 to £24million in 2019/20. The Cabinet Member for Children's Services stated that the figure for 2017/18 was for a seven month contract rather than a full year, which accounted for the large difference. The Director of Children's Services added that the increased budget from 2018/19 took account of the high number of children who were now in receipt of support, for

whom no financial provision had previously been made. Members were informed that the budget had also been reviewed to take out unachievable income targets.

Members were informed that the Dedicated Schools Grant would be £2.2million higher in 2019/20 than the previous year, which was primarily due to the growth in pupil numbers. Of this figure, £386,000 was specifically allocated to the high needs block by central Government. Members were told that a per pupil formula had been agreed by the schools forum and all schools would receive the same amount of per pupil funding from the Dedicated Schools Grant, or higher, compared to the previous year. The exception to this would be schools where the national Minimum Funding Guarantee cuts in at -1.5%.

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services said there had been an overspend of £1.3million on the Dedicated Schools Grant, and this was being monitored. She added that this was reflective of the national picture, and that neighbouring local authorities had overspends of closer to £10million. It was confirmed to Members that the Dedicated Schools Grant was already included on the Council's balance sheet, along with the balance status of all maintained schools within the Royal Borough. The Director of Children's Services informed Members that the Government was consulting on whether there should be a formal recovery plan relating to the Dedicated Schools Grant if the balance was more than 1% overspent, and whether local authorities should be liable for topping it up in the event of any overspending. There were some Judicial Reviews of this aspect currently taking place.

Regarding the Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers over the age of 16 referenced in Appendix Q, the Director of Children's Services stated that staff were confident they were the age they claim to be. If there were doubts then dental aging checks could be taken with the person's consent, although there had been no reason to do this. Additional funding for this had been provided by the Government. Members were told that older asylum seekers generally did not incur much by way of additional funding resources, whereas younger asylum seekers would be more inclined to require funding, for example for health/trauma reasons.

The Director of Children's Services stated that the Budget had been set with a greater regard for national forecast trends, and commended the Budget to Members. He publicly thanked the officers who had helped produce the Budget, particularly as a number of difficult decisions had had to be made to reduce the amount of funding for other service areas in order to support the increased budget for children's services. Members thanked officers for producing the report. The Chairman stated it was a pity that nobody was present from the Opposition to raise any concerns about the Budget.

The Chairman informed Members that Queensmead School (an independent school) had announced the previous day, at short notice, that it would be closing. Members were informed that Holyport College had agreed to take on some of Queensmead's A Level pupils, but parents had been contacting the Council about alternative school places. Members were informed that they should refer any parents to School Admissions at the Council. The Director of Children's Services said 59 children would need to find alternative school places. A few of the pupils have Education, Health and Care plans and there might be an increase in high needs block cost as a result. Additional funding would be needed for state funded nursery places as 85% these had been paid in advance to the setting. The Director of Children's Services told Members that the arrangements to recover this was currently unclear.

It was

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Panel noted the report and approved the:

- i) Detailed recommendations contained in Appendix A which included a base council tax at Band D of £961.33, including a 2.99% increase of £27.91.**
- ii) Adult social care precept to remain unchanged at £74.74.**
- iii) Fees and charges contained in Appendix D.**
- iv) Capital strategy in Appendix G.**
- v) Capital programme, shown in Appendices H & I, for the financial year 2019/20.**
- vi) Prudential borrowing limits set out in Appendix L.**

- vii) **Business rate tax base calculation, detailed in Appendix P, and its use in the council tax requirement in Appendix A.**
- viii) **Deputy Director and Head of Finance in consultation with the Lead Members for Finance and Children's Services to amend the total schools budget to reflect actual Dedicated Schools Grant levels once received.**
- ix) **Delegation to the Deputy Director and Head of Finance and Lead Member for Finance to include the precept from the Berkshire Fire and Rescue Authority once the precept is announced.**

ACHIEVING FOR CHILDREN PERFORMANCE REPORT

Members were told that as part of the review, staff from each of the five service areas under Achieving for Children (AfC) had been asked how far the key potential benefits identified at the outset of the contract had been realised, and how much of that had been down to the changes that had been implemented. The main highlights from the feedback related to improved engagement with residents and aligning policy frameworks across different service areas in order to improve efficiency. It had been proposed in the next Capital Work Programme that the ICS system be transferred to Liquid Logic as used in the other area of AfC to improve efficiency and help staff across all service areas to track cases more effectively. It was noted that the use of agency staff had reduced, which was seen as a benefit as using permanent members of staff meant a more consistent delivery of service.

With regards to the engagement with foster carers and the changes being led by AfC, Members were told that there were three levels of engagement an individual carer could opt for. The first was to provide foster care and use the information provided; the second was to talk about the service proposals and recruit more carers; and the third was helping with the design of particular proposals relating to foster caring. Three foster carers from the Royal Borough had chosen to be on the joint area board, and they had helped AfC address some concerns that had been raised more widely. The Director of Children's Services said that foster carers felt communication with them was good, and he had not had to take away any action points from his last informal meeting with them.

Cllr Wilson stated that 90 per cent of children in the Royal Borough went to a school that had either an outstanding or good Ofsted report, and that there were no schools that were in special measures. He asked what was being done to ensure this continued. The Director of Children's Services said that providing resources for schools not rated as outstanding or good was a priority for the Council, and support was provided through a wide range of the Council's service areas. Although a large number of schools had become Academies, they were still liaising with the Council about potential improvements. Each school in the Royal Borough had been allocated a named education officer to help maintain standards, and to enable any concerns to be escalated more efficiently and quickly.

The Deputy Director – Strategy and Commissioning said all commissioned services were being delivered, and this was being kept under review. It was considered important to stick with the service providers and allow time for their way of working to embed, and the implementation of the commissioned services was not a 'quick win'. It was felt that Achieving for Children had the better expertise to be able to provide certain services, with the Director of Children's Services giving the example of arranging family group conferencing. The Cabinet Member for Children's Services said that Achieving for Children had been selected as the service provider from six options, which had been chosen after a two year research process. She stated she was content with the level of service being provided, and there had been an improvement in the quality of staff that had been recruited. The Cabinet Member for Children's Services said that 90 per cent of the services provided by Achieving for Children were statutory, but that officers had correctly identified which areas to prioritise.

The Chairman asked if a rating system could be provided to outline the various success levels for the services listed in the report appendices. The Director of Children's Services said he would look into providing this for the next performance report. The Chairman and Vice

Chairman both said they had been reassured by the answers that had been provided by officers about the performance of Achieving for Children.

The contents of the report was noted by Members.

TENDER APPROVAL - WASTE COLLECTION FOR SCHOOLS

Members were informed that following a tendering process, Veolia had been awarded the contract to collect landfill waste from schools. In addition they had offered to include the provision of food waste bins for all schools, which had not been a previous contractual offer. Schools would be given advice on how to make best use of the food waste bins. Members were informed that litter picking equipment was not included as part of the tender, although such equipment was available from elsewhere. Collection of recycling from schools was already done separately by the Council, but the tender would ensure that Veolia would maximise the number of items that were capable of being recycled. It had been agreed to keep this as a separate contract due to the volatility of the recycling collection market.

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services told Members that improving recycling and waste management in schools was a project being worked on by the Girl's Policy Forum. Part of this review had led to extra bins being installed on popular walking routes to certain schools.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Panel noted the report and:

i) Approved the award of the new schools waste contract to Veolia Environmental Services Ltd.

ii) Delegated authority to the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Lead Member for Children's Services, to exercise the option to extend the contract for up to an additional two years.

WORK PROGRAMME

Members were informed that the Annual Education Report would be presented at the next meeting as it was due to be considered at March's Cabinet meeting. It was agreed that the item on the Inclusion Metrics Framework should be deferred to a future meeting.

The contents of the Work Programme was noted by Members.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 - EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: To approve the motion to exclude the public from the remainder of the meeting.

The meeting, which began at 6.30 pm, finished at 7.38 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....