

Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 11 November 2020

Attendance

Members of the Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Rupinderjit Kaur
Cllr Beverley Momenabadi
Cllr Rita Potter (Chair)
Cllr Clare Simm
Cllr Udey Singh
Cllr Rashpal Kaur
Cllr Sohail Khan (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Paul Sweet

Co-opted Members

Cyril Randles Church of England – Diocese of Lichfield Representative
Syed Naqvi and David Omoehiomwan - Wolverhampton Youth Council

Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith
Julia Cleary
James Barlow
Emma Bennett
Robert Hart

Martin Stevens
Alison Shannon

Scrutiny Officer
Systems and Scrutiny Manager
Senior Accounting Officer
Director of Children and Adult Services
Head of Service - Inclusion and
Empowerment
Scrutiny Officer
Chief Accountant

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

1 **Welcome and Introductions**

Cllr Rita Potter, Chair, welcomed everyone to the virtual meeting and advised it was being live streamed to the press and public. Cllr Potter advised that she was not expecting any exempt or restricted items on the agenda. A recording of the meeting would be available for viewing on the Council's website at a future date.

2 **Meeting procedures to be followed**

Cllr Potter explained the protocol to be followed during the meeting for asking questions and reminded everyone that microphones should be muted and cameras off, unless they have been invited to speak.

Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, invited all attendees to introduce themselves to confirm they were present at the meeting.

3 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from the following member of the panel:

Cllr John Rowley

4 **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest recorded.

5 **Minutes of the previous meeting (9.9.2020)**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9.9.2020 be approved as a correct record.

6 **Matters arising**

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

7 **Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021-2022 to 2023-2024**

James Barlow, Finance Business Partner, presented the report and referred the panel to recommendations asking for comments on the draft budget medium term financial strategy and also the budget issues relevant to the remit of the panel. The comments will be included in a report to Scrutiny Board after they have been approved by the Chair and Vice Chair as part of the response to the annual budget scrutiny for their consideration.

The Finance Business Partner outlined the key parts of the draft budget medium term financial strategy report budget 2021-2022 to 2023-2024 and stated the Council has a legal requirement to set a balanced budget each year.

The Council was able to set a balanced budget for 2020-2021 without the use of General reserves which was approved by Council on the 4 March 2020 and at that time it was noted that budget reductions totalling £15.5 million were required in 2021-2022 of £15.5 million rising to around £20 million over the medium term to 2023-2024.

The Finance Business Partner commented that the budget was prepared prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has had a major impact on Council.

The Finance Business Partner outlined details of the net revenue expenditure budget for the Council was £248.2 million for the 2020-2021 and the report outlined the budgets for those services relevant to the remit of the panel and referred to the chart which gave a breakdown of annual expenditure.

The Finance Business Partner commented on the various one-off grants the Council has received to date to support the costs of Covid-19 and that these grants were considered to sufficient to support the costs in the short-term with a small shortfall of £324,000 (2020-2021). This figure does not include costs arising from the second national lockdown and further restrictions.

The Finance Business Partner commented on the main assumptions underpinning the report and the expectations of future government announcements in December 2020 about any additional funding that will be given to local authorities to help meet costs associated with second lockdown.

The Finance Business Partner outlined the estimated updated budget deficit without the impact of Covid-19 was £4.5 million in 2021-2022. However, if the Council does not receive funding from the government to cover costs pressures and lost income relating to Covid-19 then the budget deficit is estimated to be in the region of £23.2 million for 2021-2022, rising to £40 million over the medium-term period to 2023-2024. In the event that Government do not provide sufficient funding to support these pressures, the Council would need to undertake a fundamental review of all services to identify savings would be needed to set a balanced budget.

The Finance Business Partner commented on the expenditure and income figures detailed in the report for the service.

Emma Bennett, Director of Children's Services, commented on the strategic vision for supporting children and young people within the City and the priorities for the service. The panel were briefed on the publication of the Relighting Our City recovery plan. The plan details the response by the Council to the challenges to the City arising from the pandemic. The panel were also briefed on specific areas of work aimed at creating and promoting more opportunities for children and young people in line with published strategic priorities.

The panel were invited to give feedback to Cabinet on the Draft Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2021-2022 to 2023-2024.

The panel queried the Council's approach to commercialisation and the work being done to boost social value contracts and encouraging the use of local services and local businesses to help retain more spending within the City.

The panel also queried the Council's procurement strategy and in particular work done with neighbouring authorities to negotiate better value when contracting for services or goods.

The Director of Children's Services commented on the contracting work undertaken regionally and sub-regionally to procure and commission services to help reduce costs, for example, there is regional framework for residential placements for children and young people. In addition, there is also a regional framework for foster placements and supported accommodation for care leavers which is helping to reduce costs. The Director of Children's Services gave other examples of joint work being done with neighbouring authorities to reduce costs.

The panel queried the impact of the recent announcement about the vaccine on the future assumptions about the budget challenges detailed in the report. The Finance Business Partner commented that impact on current budget assumptions will depend how the vaccine programme is rolled out and other linked factors. The Council will continue modelling work based on different scenarios of the Government's response to Covid-19 when assessing the impact on future finances and specifically a decision by Government about whether it will fully fund the additional costs resulting from Covid-19. The service will continue to monitor policy changes in relation to Covid-19 or Government policy and will adjust the budget assumptions as necessary. At the date of drafting the Council is waiting for a decision on future Government grants to local authorities, which is expected in December 2020.

The panel queried the possibility of using Council reserves to meet the budget shortfall. Alison Shannon, Chief Accountant, commented that the Council is confident

of being able to manage the projected budget shortfall of £4.5 million due to work being done to identify efficiencies. However, the projected shortfall with Covid-19 of £23.2 million for 2021-2022 would need a fundamental review of all services.

The Chief Accountant commented that the key cost pressure is the impact of Covid-19 on the Council was the reduction in income, particularly in the collection of council tax and business rates. The use of reserves is a last resort and the Council is working hard to avoid the need to consider this option.

Resolved:

The panel agreed the recommendations set out in the report.

- 8 **Outcome from Wolverhampton Youth Council Survey (report to follow)**
Syed Naqvi and David Omoehiomwan, representing Wolverhampton Youth Council, presented the key findings of the survey of young people and their experiences of education during the first lockdown. Syed outlined the challenges to collecting survey responses during the Covid 19 restrictions. The findings are based on responses from 344 young people. The majority of responses were received from young people in Year 9 to Years 11.

The survey was promoted to secondary schools during a five-week period. The survey focused on the educational experiences of home education of young people during the first national lockdown. Young people were asked to comment on their experiences of interactive home learning and to make suggestions that would improve their experience in the future.

Syed and David commented on the list of recommendations for future home learning during a lockdown. The importance of interaction with the schoolteacher in offering emotional and educational support was highlighted as being important issue for young people. The survey highlighted the range of difficulties reported when working remotely, for example, young people lacking the necessary equipment at home such as laptops, printers and microphones needed to take part in online teaching sessions. An issue highlighted in the survey was the need for young people to get consistent feedback from teachers and this was a recommendation to improve online teaching experience in the future.

The panel thanked both presenters for their report and supported the recommendations for the future of home learning during a lockdown or where they need to work from home. The panel were invited to comment on the presentation.

The panel queried the reasons why young people surveyed were having difficulties in contacting their teacher. The Director of Children's Services commented that national guidance has been issued to schools since September 2020 about the requirement to develop a remote a learning plan. All schools in Wolverhampton have completed their plans. The service has also worked with schools to quality assure their remote learning plans. In view of the survey findings this issue will be discussed with schools to share their experiences of what has been learnt from young people about what worked and what didn't during lockdown and how we can enhance and highlight good practice in remote learning going forward.

The Director of Children's Services commented on the range of work done to keep as many pupils as possible in school, which is a priority for the service and the ongoing conversations with individual schools around lockdown. There is agreement that teaching is best when it is done face-to-face and that some subjects cannot be taught remotely. The service is working really closely with schools to make sure that when young people are sent home to self-isolate that as much as possible a positive learning experience for them.

Resolved

1. The panel agreed to support the recommendations from the survey.
2. The panel suggested a further survey should be done in near future to assess progress in the areas highlighted as areas of concern and presented to a future meeting of the panel.

9

SEND Self-Evaluation

Rob Hart, Head of Service Inclusion, presented the report on Wolverhampton's self-evaluation of services for special educational needs and disabilities in preparation for an inspection by Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in 2021. In preparation for the planned inspection detailed work has been done to complete a self-evaluation exercise to identify areas of strength and for development as part of Wolverhampton's process of continuous improvement. The current self-evaluation was signed off by members of SEND Partnership board in August 2020.

The inspection will evaluate how effectively the Council and other local partner agencies in the local area are meeting their respective responsibilities to children and young people who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

The Head of Service Inclusion outlined work done since the five year SEND Strategy was drafted in response to the SEND reforms. The Head of Service Inclusion presented a short video to summarise the development of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) and to set out the range of work being done in Wolverhampton to achieve the priorities detailed in the SEND strategy.

The Head of Service Inclusion commented on the findings of carer and parents and the work done to help children with educational needs and disabilities and their families to access the right level of support needed. The aim is to achieve change by talking and listening to people and help children and young people to live ordinary lives and take part in everyday social and leisure activities. The findings from a survey highlighted the need for more social and leisure options for young people and to overcome barriers due to issues such as the lack of transportation and financial challenges.

The Head of Service Inclusion commented on the importance of young people being able to access fun activities.

The Head of Service Inclusion commented on another finding from the survey which identified areas in need of improvement such as education support employment opportunities.

The number of children with special educational needs is increasing and this is predicted to increase in the future. There is concern about the number of children in this group who have excluded from school population. There was also concern about the number of young people in the criminal justice system and in care and child protection plans. There is a commitment from members of the Partners in Education Health to promote inclusion and maximise opportunities for children and young people to become more independent with a focus on abilities and disabilities. Details about the Wolverhampton Local Offer document is available online.

The Head of Service Inclusion referred to the video presentation which set out the some of the challenges and also the Council's priorities in relation to special educational needs and disabilities in the City. The inspection of the local area's effectiveness will not focus on any particular service and will consider how effective how partner organisations are working together to implement the SEND reforms introduced in 2015. The review will also include assessing the work of health providers and commissioners and also public health.

Wolverhampton is one of only two areas in the West Midlands who are still waiting to be inspected. The Head of Service Inclusion advised the panel that the document is part of our preparation for the inspection and highlighted the importance of having a self-evaluation of the service.

The Head of Service Inclusion offered reassurance to the panel that the necessary work has been done to prepare for inspection and that there is shared understanding among partners of our strengths and also areas for development. There is also a commitment to drive improvements forward.

Cllr Dr Mike Hardacre, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, emphasised the importance of work done to prepare for a joint inspection by CQC and OFSTED during 2021. The Cabinet Member advised the panel that EHCPs are regularly reviewed and offered reassurance of a commitment to get children and young people the right provision and support at an early stage. The Cabinet Member suggested the reporting the findings of the inspection report when published should be presented to a future meeting of the panel.

The panel welcomed the report and supported the work done to prepare for the inspection.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report.

10

Spotlight Review - Education

Emma Bennett, Director of Children's Services, presented a report which gave an update on work done since the briefing giving to the panel in September 2020 on education and children services.

The Director of Children's Services advised the panel that previously all schools and education centres were closed at the start of the Covid 19 pandemic but did remain open to vulnerable children and also those of key workers. The restrictions were relaxed over time before schools were allowed to reopen fully at the start of the new term in September. All Wolverhampton schools have remained open since the start

of term. The Director of Children's Services commented on the efforts to encourage and support joint working during lockdown among schools which has helped to support education provision for all children and young people across the City.

This effort has been supported by a number of working groups which have focused on key issues such as developing arrangements for baseline assessments.

The education service continues to regularly engage with education providers and teachers who have attended engagement sessions. In addition, the previous weekly Headteachers bulletin is now published twice weekly to update schools on any changes to national guidance. This has been a joint effort involving the work of colleagues in Education Services, Public Health, Health and Safety, HR.

The Director of Children's Services praised the response from schools and the shared commitment from partners across the City to work together to keep children and young people in education as long as it is safe to do so. The Director of Children's Services commented on the school attendance rates and reported that average attendance is now about 90 per cent, which is very encouraging. There have been increasing number of Covid-19 cases in schools which has affected attendance rates, but this is still largely in line with the national attendance rates. There is further analysis work to be done on the attendance data. The Director of Children's Services commented on the concern among some parents who remain cautious about sending their children to school if they're displaying any kind of symptoms whether that is a general cough or cold or similar to the signs of a possible Covid-19 infection.

The service is working closely with those families to assure them about the safety measures which have been introduced and to encourage them to bring their children to school. The Director of Children's Services commented on impact of school attendance after the change in Government guidance to parents who are assessed as being clinically extremely vulnerable.

To support parents to bring their children to school the School Attendance Team have been given extra resources to work with families in supportive manner, which has worked well. There is a reluctance from the service to act against parents who have concerns and the approach will be to continue working with them on building confidence in the safety measures that have been introduced in schools. The service has also used social media sites to target certain communities to get key messages to support parents to bring their children to school. The Director of Children's Services advised the panel that school attendance is mandatory, unless a child is clinically extremely vulnerable.

There has been a significant increase in parents choosing elective home education due to concerns about Covid 19 since September. The increase is similar to the number seen in other areas of the country. The Council has been advised that following the end of previous consultation on changes in home school education policies the Government are expected publish new guidance.

The Director of Children's Services commented on the range of support available to schools and colleges to help vulnerable learners in addition to specialist support given to children with special educational needs and disabilities who might experience the most difficulty in returning to school. The Director of Children's

Services advised the panel that the Wellbeing for Education Return training programme is being rolled out to other schools after a trial.

The Director of Children's Services commented on the arrangements for managing outbreaks of Covid 19 in schools. The total number of positive cases in education settings has stabilised. The work has been supported by Public Health colleagues who offer a telephone helpline for schools in addition support from DfE.

The Director of Children's Services commented on the findings from a Digital Divide survey which highlighted a key issue of lack of access to devices. The service is working with colleagues across the Council to address the issue of the digital divide for children. The findings from the survey will be used to target support available to young people and to inform the approach to remote learning. The service monitors the situation when a school bubble has had to self-isolate and ordered laptops from DfE. A self-evaluation tool to support schools in monitoring and evaluating remote learning has been developed.

The Director of Children's Services gave a summary of the range of projects aimed at helping young people gain skills as part of work done to reduce levels of youth unemployment.

The Director of Children's Services briefed the panel on the decision made by the Council to provide free school meals during October half-term to approximately 16,000 children and young people.

A local strategy for delivering free school meals will be developed for Christmas holiday. The Director of Children's Services praise the contribution of schools to the success of the free school scheme by either issuing vouchers or buying food for families, who responded at short notice.

The panel queried the increase in the number of parents choosing to home educate their children and also when new Government guidance was expected. The Director of Children's Services responded that the Council is making representations to the DfE of the need for a policy change and comments submitted as part of earlier consultation which set out a number of options being considered at the time. The issue of home education has also been raised by Association of the Directors of Children's Services who also have concerns about the current policy. A key proposal in the consultation was the introduction of a statutory register of children being home educated. Wolverhampton already has a register of parents or carers who are home educating their children and can follow up any issues of concern.

The panel queried the impact of Head Teachers Bulletin and how effective it was in getting key messages out to schools. The Director of Children's Services agreed to follow this up with schools and report back findings to a future meeting of the panel.

Cllr Dr Mike Hardacre, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, wanted to formally praise the work of led by the Director of Children's Services to ensure that free school meals and vouchers were provided over half term at short notice

The panel welcomed the comprehensive report and congratulated the service on the work done.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report.

11

Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together Partnership - Annual Report 2019/20

Andrew Wolverson, Head of Children's Strategy and Partnerships, introduced the report and explained the changes made to the arrangements for presenting the safeguarding annual report. The Head of Children's Strategy and Partnerships advised that there is no longer an independent chair of the Safeguarding Board. The Executive Partnership Board is chaired by one of the three statutory partners.

The Head of Children's Strategy and Partnerships advised that Vicky Murphy was appointed as the Independent Scrutineer and will be presenting a report on the effectiveness of the partnership working arrangements during the last 12 months. Vicky Murphy explained the structure of the report and highlighted the commitment to safeguarding among members of the partnership board and also the excellent quality of the work being done every day to support the most vulnerable people in society.

The panel were invited to comment on the report.

The panel queried possible safeguarding issues for people who may be at risk but who are self-isolating and therefore not seen by other people. The Head of Children's Strategy and Partnerships responded that this issue has been highlighted in the report and added that a number of campaigns have focused on issues such as domestic violence and financial abuse to raise public awareness. This work has been supported by initiatives aimed at mobilising existing frontline services to engage with people who may not have contacted the service in the past. In addition, Health Visitors are responding to safeguarding concerns by visiting people more quickly when issues are reported.

The panel discussed the issue of examples of either distraction burglary or people visiting older people pretending to work for the Council and asking for bank details to do shopping on their behalf. The panel commented that such incidents are reported to Cllrs who raise them with the police, but they often don't find out the outcome of the complaint. The panel suggested that it would be helpful in the future to get a future report on any action that has been taken in response to such complaints. The Head of Children's Strategy and Partnerships agreed to discuss the matter with Becky Wilkinson and the Chief Inspector responsible for neighbourhood policing and report findings back to a future meeting.

The panel thanked the presenters for the report which was very comprehensive.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report.

12

Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel 2019 20 - Draft Work Programme

Julia Cleary, Scrutiny and Systems Manager, briefed the panel on background to the development of the work programme and invited to panel to comment on the document and also suggest new topics that could be added.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report.