

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Children and Education Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes



Monday 31 January 2022

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Alexandra Sanderson (Chair), Lucy Richardson, Asif Siddique, Mercy Umeh and Mark Loveday

Co-opted members

Nandini Ganesh, Parentsactive Representative
Nadia Taylor, Parent Governor Representative

Other Councillors

Councillor Larry Culhane (Cabinet Member for Children and Education)

External Guests

Debbie Gabriel (Head of Service, Adopt London West)
Sonal Thakrar (Adoptive Parent)

Officers

Jacqui McShannon (Director of Children's Services)
Emily Hill (Director of Finance)
Jan Parnell (Director of Education)
Mandy Lawson (Assistant Director, Education and Disabilities)
Tony Burton (Head of Finance for Children's Services and Education)
Matthew Coulbeck (Secondary Adviser and 14-25 Development)
Keith Tysoe (Principal Adviser SEND and Inclusion)
Amana Gordon (Operational Director, Children and Young Peoples Service)
Satwinder Saraon (Strategic Lead for Early Years and SEND Transformation)
Simone Melia (Head of Homelessness Prevention)
Alistair Ayres (Head of Programmes)
David Abbott (Head of Governance)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Matt Jenkins and Eleanor Allen.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES

Members noted the minutes of the meeting held on 16 November 2021.

4. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

No questions were received.

5. 2022 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

Jacqui McShannon (Director of Children's Services) and Tony Burton (Head of Finance for Children's Services and Education) presented the report. Emily Hill (Director of Finance) was also in attendance to answer questions on the corporate budget.

Jacqui McShannon gave an introduction, presenting the Children's Services vision for all children in the borough. She also highlighted the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and families, the achievements of the department, and the whole system approach to budget management that had enabled those achievements within a constrained financial environment.

Tony Burton explained that the 2022/23 draft budget consisted of total planned expenditure of just under £156m, of which £109m was spent on education services. £87m of the money for education was from the dedicated schools grant and would go to the borough's schools. A further £14m was from other Government grants. The department was proposing £533k of savings and £534k of growth.

Tony Burton informed members that the Council had negotiated £20m of funding from the Department for Education (DfE) to address historic deficits in the High Needs Block. The DfE had agreed a plan to pay off the deficit over the medium term to enable the Council to focus on future investment. Children's Services had also secured a £1.2m capital grant from the DfE to support the High Needs Block strategy and invest in the placement strategy.

Jacqui McShannon summarised the budget presentation and said the Council was committed to delivering high quality services, improving outcomes, and protecting key services.

The Chair asked about the impact of budget cuts. Jacqui McShannon said the department had three key tenets for services – providing quality services, delivered locally where possible (either designed with the community in mind or co-produced), and intervening early.

Nandini Ganesh asked about progress on the High Needs Block safety valve arrangement with the DfE and if the demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) was decreasing. Jacqui McShannon said the arrangement was negotiated a year ago. It would be a huge transformation and was being co-produced with partners and schools. There was still a lot of work to do to develop confidence amongst stakeholders. The department was also going to be investing in new posts to monitor effectiveness of services and develop a performance management culture. Demand hadn't decreased but the plan was still in the early stages and the numbers weren't expected to decrease yet.

Nandini Ganesh asked if officers could evidence the outcomes at the next meeting. There had been some concerns from parents about inclusion. Jacqui McShannon said officers could talk through the programmes and services that had been put in place.

ACTION: Jacqui McShannon

Tony Burton noted that the safety valve funding covered the historic deficit, but the department's assumptions involved increasing expenditure on the High Needs Block over the medium term.

Councillor Larry Culhane (Cabinet Member for Children and Education) explained that the Government had been underfunding special educational needs for many years. Reforms in 2014 increased access to services but reduced the funding which had led to High Needs Block deficits across the country.

Nandini Ganesh clarified that the Council's plan, in layman terms, was to manage the need for EHCPs and improve inclusion in mainstream schools. She supported that plan but noted that there were some concerns about it so wanted to discuss it in more detail in future.

Nandini Ganesh questioned why savings were being made in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) when there was high demand. Jacqui McShannon said the Council wasn't cutting its contribution, but Health was increasing its level of funding.

Nandini Ganesh noted the demand for travel care had increased with EHCPs and asked if that would start declining with the safety valve agreement and ongoing High Needs Block transformation. Jacqui McShannon said the transformation programme would take some time to have an impact. A sufficiency review was being undertaken which would show where more local resource was needed. Tony Burton clarified that the safety valve agreement didn't require the Council to reduce expenditure on EHCPs. The plan assumed growth in EHCPs and increasing expenditure on young people in H&F. Nandini Ganesh said that was very reassuring.

Councillor Lucy Richardson asked if the safety valve agreement was specific to H&F. Jacqui McShannon said H&F was one of 6 Council's invited to negotiate with the DfE. It was a rigorous process but ultimately the DfE had confidence in H&F's willingness and ability to deliver transformation and improvement to improve access to services. Councillor Richardson congratulated them on the agreement and asked if it was, in part, a recognition that the High Needs Block was underfunded in previous years. Tony Burton said the pace of funding increases over last few financial years showed a recognition that they had not put enough money into the system in the past. It was still a difficult area for many local authorities.

Councillor Richardson asked if the transformation plans would reduce the need for EHCPs. Jacqui McShannon said the intention was that earlier access to therapies and services would reduce demand for plans.

Councillor Richardson commended the Council's work with schools and asked how the local authority was influencing academies. Jacqui McShannon said the department had developed strong partnerships with academy schools in the borough. The Council and schools worked together in a collegiate way through Schools Forum, primary and secondary networks, SEN workshops, and budget workshops.

Councillor Mark Loveday asked for more information on the falling rolls support provided to schools. Jacqui McShannon said it was due to the falling birth rate and fewer children applying for primary schools across London. In previous years there had been an expansion but that had now reversed, and it impacted the financial situation for the borough's primary schools.

Councillor Loveday asked why it wasn't included in the risk register. Jacqui McShannon said the risk register only included immediate financial risks. Tony Burton added that it would affect funding in future years, but it affected the delegated budgets of schools not the Council's general fund.

Councillor Loveday asked when the High Needs Block deficit would be completely paid off. Tony Burton said the in-year position would be in balance by the end of next year.

Councillor Loveday asked if the top slice of the school's budget was going up or down this year. Tony Burton said the top-slice was only for maintained primary schools. The funding covered support services like financial support, a maternity fund, school improvement services etc. He said it was reducing year-on-year.

Councillor Loveday asked for more information on the proposed £400k saving for care leavers placements. Tony Burton said the Council had joined the West London Alliance's procurement scheme to secure better value for money placements and had been working to ensure there was a good range of in-house foster carers.

Councillor Loveday noted that the budget report from last year had almost identical savings of 400k in 2021/22, 2022/23, and 2023/24 and asked if that was sustainable year-on-year. Tony Burton said the savings were sustainable (noting they were cumulative). The proposed 2022/23 savings built on activities in previous budgets.

Councillor Siddique asked if the Council had sufficient resources to cope with another pandemic wave. Emily Hill said there weren't any specific additional items for Covid in the Children's Services budget but there was a Covid contingency fund in the corporate budget that departments could bid for. Finance officers expected some Covid grant underspend by the end of the year.

Councillor Mercy Umeh thanked the Children's Services team for their hard work on the budget, particularly considering the challenges imposed by the pandemic. Her comments were echoed by the Chair and other committee members.

RESOLVED

The Committee noted the budget report.

6. ADOPT LONDON WEST – ASSURANCE REPORT

Amana Gordon (Operational Director, Children and Young Peoples Service) and Debbie Gabriel (Adopt London West) attended to present the item on the progress and activity of Adopt London West including performance data and how good outcomes were being achieved for children. They were joined by adoptive parent Sonal Thakrar who spoke about her experiences of the process.

Debbie Gabriel informed members that the Adopt London West (ALW) Regional Adoption Agency became operational on 1 September 2019 with a formal launch in October 2019. A comprehensive partnership agreement forms the basis of the ongoing partnership arrangements. H&F's Director of Children's Services sits on the partnership board which provides oversight to ensure that the shared service is appropriately scrutinised and supported to deliver improved outcomes for children and adopters.

Sonal Thakrar, a newly adoptive parent, addressed the Committee to discuss her experiences of adopting through Adopt London West. She spoke about her initial fears of prejudice, being in a same-sex, ethnic minority couple – but those fears were quickly allayed, and she found the service to be warm and inviting, saying they understood inclusion and embraced adopters from diverse backgrounds. Communication was clear and consistent. She appreciated the mentoring made available from other same-sex couples who had adopted from ethnic minorities. She highlighted the high-quality training and said she benefitted from access to the national training network. She felt well supported by social workers through the matching process, considered to be the hardest part of adoption. And the level of support remained high even when services went remote.

The Chair asked about post-adoption support and if there were things that stood out that others should take on board. Sonal Thakrar said the mentoring and checking-in were both vital. Adoption was a complex, challenging process so education and discussion around the issues faced by first-time adopters was important. Open conversations were valuable. She said contact was well managed and good partnerships were made with health visitors. She was helped to apply to an adoption

support fund for play therapy. She felt it was a 'total care package' and felt 'emotionally held' at a critical time.

The Chair asked what Sonal would change about the process if she could. Sonal Thakrar said ALW should promote best practices to other local authorities. She added that the time from match to placement was a real challenge outside of ALW.

The Chair asked Debbie Gabriel about the Black adoption project at ALW – how adopters were recruited and how successful it had been. Debbie Gabriel said there had been lots of enquiries – the challenge was understanding what adopters have to offer. The overall number of adoptions and children placed for adoption was falling so the challenge was finding the right families. Amana Gordon said the Council wanted a diverse range of carers who were not just a cultural match but also met the needs of the children.

Councillor Mark Loveday asked Sonal what, if anything, she would change about ALW. Sonal Thakrar said she had a great experience with the organisation.

Councillor Loveday asked for clarification on the split of organisational responsibilities between adopters and children. Debbie Gabriel said ALW had primary responsibility for family finding for the four partner authorities.

Councillor Loveday asked for rough figures for placing children with local adopters. Debbie Gabriel said the goal was to place all of the children in London. Currently they were using a lot of inter-agency placements. Due to the circumstances of the children coming through the system they were often difficult to match. She said she could provide figures on the number of children placed with adopters from H&F after the meeting.

ACTION: Debbie Gabriel / Amana Gordon

Amana Gordon noted that performance wasn't currently where the service wanted it to be regarding local adoptions so this year the team were focused on recruitment so there were enough adopters waiting when children come through in future years. Councillor Loveday said it would be useful for future reports on this to set out the KPIs and benchmarks for the service.

ACTION: Debbie Gabriel / Amana Gordon

Nadia Taylor asked if most of the children put up for adoption were coming through the care system or elsewhere. Debbie Gabriel said only a small minority (4 last year) were 'relinquished babies' and the majority came from court decisions.

The Chair thanked Amana Gordon, Debbie Gabriel, and Sonal Thakrar for sharing her experiences of the process.

RESOLVED

The Committee reviewed, commented on, and questioned the contents of the report. This is to provide evidence that the management of the adoption service is being monitored and challenged to promote good outcomes for children in line with standard 25.6 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2014).

7. EDUCATION OUTCOMES UPDATE

Jan Parnell (Director of Education), Matthew Coulbeck (Secondary Adviser and 14-25 Development), and Keith Tysoe (Principal Adviser SEND and Inclusion) attended to present the report. Matthew Coulbeck highlighted the good outcomes across schools, including special schools and alternate provision. The 2021 cohort have generally experienced better GCSE outcomes than those in 2020 and 2019, though due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the summer exam series was replaced by teacher assessments.

The Chair noted that BTEC students hadn't benefitted from the exam inflation seen in other exams and asked if there was anything more the Council could do to help young people who had done BTECs. Matthew Coulbeck said it may have already affected University applications this year, but he hoped it would be a one-off year, with exams returning next year. He noted that officers didn't have evidence at this stage that young people with BTECs hadn't been accepted where they wanted to go.

The Chair noted the reduction in fixed term exclusions from 21 to 5 and asked what was behind that. Matthew Coulbeck said schools had put in a huge effort during the lockdown to support students, and young people were not in the same situations they would have been before that could lead to exclusions. Jan Parnell added that young people received excellent support from the Virtual School who nurture and supported young people in their academic and social wellbeing. The Chair highlighted the achievements of children in care, saying it was a testament to the wrap-around care provided in the borough.

Councillor Mark Loveday discussed the difficulty of assessing progression during the pandemic and asked how useful the data from the pandemic would be useful in future years – and at what point could officers compare it with pre-pandemic figures. Matthew Coulbeck said it would be difficult, but he was more concerned with those young people who would be taking exams in the next few years. They had missed out on key years of in-person teaching and may fall behind if there isn't sufficient catch-up in place.

The Chair thanked officers and the borough's schools on their achievements, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.

RESOLVED

The Committee noted the report.

8. UPDATE ON AFGHAN FAMILIES

Satwinder Saraon (Strategic Lead for Early Years and SEND Transformation) and Simone Melia (Head of Homelessness Prevention) presented the item on the support given to the 190 refugees who arrived from Afghanistan in 2021.

The Chair asked if there was more the borough could do around integration, and how residents could get involved and support the process. Satwinder Saraon said the voluntary sector had provided a lot of support. 3 young boys had been selected

for professional coaching from Middlesex County Cricket Club. People had been invited to shows, dances, and a whole range of afterschool activities. The focus now was on helping to integrate these residents into UK society. It was also necessary to manage expectations about resettlement as not all could be resettled all in the borough.

Nadia Taylor asked if the adults could be given employment opportunities to help boost their confidence. Officers said three people had been employed by a local hotel. All residents had bio-metric cards now and officers were helping them apply for jobs. Officers had worked with the Department for Work and Pensions to support job matching and applications.

The Chair thanked officers for their important work in this area.

9. WINTER 2021 HOLIDAY SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN

Alistair Ayres (Head of Programmes) introduced the item.

The Chair invited members to submit any questions on the item by email.

10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Committee noted date of the next meeting on 28 March 2022.

Councillor Mark Loveday suggested moving the start time of meetings back to 7.00pm.

Meeting started: 6.30 pm
Meeting ended: 9.30 pm

Chair

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