

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Children and Education Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes



Monday 30 January 2023

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Helen Rowbottom (Chair), Daryl Brown, Mercy Umeh, Lucy Richardson and Aliya Afzal-Khan

Co-opted members: Eleanor Allen (London Diocesan Board for Schools), Nandini Ganesh (Parentsactive Representative) and Nadia Taylor (Parent Governor Representative)

Other Councillors

Councillor Alex Sanderson (Cabinet Member for Children and Education)
Councillor Rowan Ree (Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform)

Officers

Jacqui McShannon (Strategic Director of Children's Services)
Sukvinder Kalsi (Director of Finance)
Tony Burton (Head of Finance, Children's Services and Education)
Peter Haylock (Operational Director for Education and SEND)
Amana Gordon (Operational Director, Children and Young People Services)
Jo Pymont (Assistant Director, Performance and Improvement)
Sarah Bright (Assistant Director, Children's Commissioning)
David Abbott (Head of Governance)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

Councillor Daryl Brown, Councillor Lucy Richardson, and Eleanor Allen joined the meeting remotely.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 November 2022 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. 2023 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

Councillor Rowan Ree (Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform) introduced the item. He noted the challenges of finding further efficiencies after years of austerity and the added pressure of high inflation. Despite this, he was proud of the budget which protected the Council's key priorities and included a £1m investment to support residents through the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. He thanked Cabinet Members and officers for their hard work.

Sukvinder Kalsi (Director of Finance) gave an overview of the financial context and the corporate budget, then Jacqui McShannon (Strategic Director of Children's Services) and Tony Burton (Head of Finance, Children's Services and Education) gave a presentation on the budget for Children's Services.

A resident in attendance asked why safeguarding numbers were increasing. Amana Gordon (Operational Director, Children and Young People Services) said there had been an increase pre-pandemic, then during the pandemic there was a reduction in referrals, and now the numbers had risen to their pre-pandemic level. She noted children were staying in the system longer and tended to have more complex issues. The service was working hard to support families to independence.

A resident asked if staff retention was an issue for the Children's Services department. Amana Gordon said there had been some movement following the pandemic but that had stabilised across social care, family support, and education.

Councillor Aliya Afzal-Khan asked if the increase in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) spending matched the trend in cases and Education, Health and Care Plans. Jacqui McShannon said officers had seen an increase in need and the number of plans (EHCPs). Costs were also increasing due to inflation. Peter Haylock (Operational Director for Education and SEND) noted that the spend was to ensure quality of provision across services, it wasn't used for meeting the increase in plans. He added that there had been a small dip in new plans coming through this year. More detailed data on this would be available in the next couple of weeks.

Councillor Afzal-Khan asked what the increase in spend was for if not to match the trend. Tony Burton said the investment from the Council was to support capacity and quality across the system. The cost of EHCPs was met from education budgets through a grant from the Department for Education.

Councillor Afzal-Khan asked if the Family Hub was a digital or physical hub. Sarah Bright (Assistant Director, Children's Commissioning) said the hubs would be a mix to ensure there was flexibility in the offer. Officers were looking to co-produce the hubs with the community. She hoped the first hub would be open in the next 12 months.

Councillor Lucy Richardson asked if there were plans to use speech and language therapists to diagnose or flag potential cases of autism. She also asked how the service was using social workers to bridge the gap between the NHS and the Council when transitioning people into Adult Social Care. Jacqui McShannon said the service worked with schools and the Autism Education Trust to ensure they could meet the needs of neuro-diverse children and young people. Though, she added, it was important to hold the NHS to account for the services they provided.

Peter Haylock added that the SEND delivery group had a workstream on autism led by a health team and a social work team. Health partners had made a significant investment in autism diagnosis to reduce waiting lists and ensure children could access the support they needed. The social work team and health teams were also working on a transitions plan, though it was a complex area and would take some time to implement. Councillor Richardson requested more detail on these areas of work. The Chair said the next meeting would have a Health theme and suggested information be shared at that meeting.

ACTION: Peter Haylock / David Abbott

Nandini Ganesh asked what measures were being used to determine if the safety valve arrangement was working properly. Jacqui McShannon said officers were in constant consultation with stakeholders and received further feedback from partners through the SEND delivery group. Some of the measures included the timeliness of EHCPs. Some of the investment was to understand where there were blockages.

Nandini Ganesh asked if the Stephen Wiltshire Centre was being considered as one of the Family Hubs. Sarah Bright said there was a long list of buildings, but no decisions had been made. She added that the Stephen Wiltshire Centre was very successful and there was learning to take from it.

Nandini Ganesh asked if the SEND sufficiency review had the goal of reducing support budgets. Jacqui McShannon said the review was looking at what resources were available in the borough, and any gaps, to ensure there was capacity to meet the need in the borough. One of the goals was to reduce the number of children having to travel out of the borough to receive care.

Eleanor asked if there were plans to reduce the waiting list for educational psychologists. Peter Haylock at present, once a formal application was made, no children were waiting longer than 6 weeks. There were issues a year ago, but they had been addressed and the borough was now above the national average.

Nandini Ganesh asked if schools bought in educational psychologists. Peter said he had seen an increase in schools buying in educational psychologist time to supplement the statutory provision since the pandemic. It was a challenging area to recruit to, but officers had seen significant improvements in recent years.

Nadia Taylor asked how the increase in living costs had affected schools' ability to retain teachers. Peter Haylock said schools across the country were facing serious recruitment and retention problems. However, the borough's good schools (97 percent of schools were good or outstanding) helped with recruitment. The Learning

Partnership also helped with retention by offering professional development that helped teachers progress in their careers.

Nadia Taylor asked how schools planned to provide cover during the planned strikes. Peter Haylock said schools were responsible for managing strike action, but the Council would provide support where possible. Officers were concerned about special schools having to close due to strikes though, due to the health and developmental impacts on children.

Nadia Taylor asked what the 2% Adult Social Care precept was being used for. Sukvinder Kalsi noted that the Council was investing around £10m extra in Adult Social Care to protect commitments such as free Home Care and respond to demographic pressures. Councillor Alex Sanderson suggested watching the discussion at the Health and Adult Social Care Policy and Accountability Committee that went into this area in more detail.

The Chair asked if officers monitored providers that were under pressure due to the challenging financial environment and affect service delivery. Jacqui McShannon said the Council worked closely with the West London alliance to negotiate some contracts sub-regionally to ensure they were cost-effective and resilient. Officers also carried out regular horizon-scanning exercises and they were seeing changes in some third-sector providers and their business models which could impact delivery.

The Chair asked if the commissioning environment was responsive enough to respond to the pressures on contractors. Jacqui McShannon said it was and there had been evidence of it over the past year. She noted that partnerships were increasingly important.

Councillor Afzal-Khan asked how the budget allocated to addressing educational inequalities would be spent. Tony Burton said the money would be used to develop and enhance the school effectiveness team to improve the advice and guidance they gave to schools. Jacqui McShannon noted it also linked to the Council's Industrial Strategy.

The Chair asked how officers thought about financial forecasting and modelling over the longer term. Sukvinder Kalsi said the Medium-Term Financial Plans had a four-year horizon. Officers looked at all relevant data the Council had access to and did scenario planning to produce a range of potential outcomes. The Chair said it would be interesting to see what data informed the budget setting process and what additional data would help. She suggested this as an item for the next meeting.

ACTION: David Abbott

The Chair thanked officers and members for their work on the budget and their contributions to the discussion.

RESOLVED

1. That the Committee considered the budget proposals and made recommendations to Cabinet as appropriate.

2. That the Committee considered the proposed changes to fees and charges and made recommendations as appropriate.

5. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Committee noted the date of the next meeting, scheduled for 27 March 2023.

The Chair noted that the next meeting would have a Health theme and would build on discussions at Health & Wellbeing Board about how the Council could work with the Integrated Care Partnership to improve services for children and young people in the borough.

Amana Gordon suggested the Young Carers Offer as an item for the work programme.

ACTIONS: David Abbott

Meeting started: 7.00 pm
Meeting ended: 8.41 pm

Chair

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