

Notes from the meeting of the Budget Scrutiny Panel Phase 2 – Children’s Services (except SEND) – 16 January 2024

Present

Corporate Scrutiny Committee Members

Cllr Lyn Buckingham (Chair)
Cllr Lora Lawman (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Jim Hakewill
Cllr Richard Levell
Cllr Anne Lee
Cllr Paul Marks
Cllr Russell Roberts

Apologies for absence received from Cllr Zoe McGhee (Cllr Lee substituting)

Executive Members

Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Finance and Transformation)
Cllr Scott Edwards (Children, Families, Education & Skills)

Observers

Cllr Keli Watts

Children’s Services Officers

David Watts (Director of Children’s Services)
Neil Goddard (Assistant Director of Education)
Richard Woodward (Head of Business and Performance)

Finance Officers

Janice Gotts (Executive Director for Finance and Performance)
Mark Dickenson (Assistant Director for Finance and Strategy)
Claire Edwards (Assistant Director for Finance Accountancy)
David Akinsanya (Senior Finance Business Partner)

Democratic Services Officers

Ben Smith (Head of Democratic Services/Statutory Scrutiny Officer)
Louise Tyers (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

The Committee considered a presentation by the officers of Children’s Services, which outlined the proposed 2024/25 directorate budget and the key risks relating to services the directorate delivered.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

Education

- (i) Clarification was sought as to what the pressure of £112k was for income not practically chargeable following disaggregation. Officers explained that this was the element West Northamptonshire Council would have contributed to costs but now would not due to disaggregation.
- (ii) The inclusion of a saving of £59k for attendance fines was accepted as a prudent measure. Officers confirmed that there was enough evidence from previous years that this was recurrent year on year, though the objective was for all children to attend school regularly. This inclusion reflected what actually happened and was not a target.
- (iii) It was stated that disaggregation should not be based on an ideology but on funding. Officers advised that disaggregation enabled better management of the risks and reduced the Council's exposure to changes by our external partners.
- (iv) With the announced establishment of a Spending Board, it was queried how this would work alongside scrutiny? The Executive Director advised that the two were distinct pieces of work with scrutiny looking at the strategic side and the Spending Board looking operationally. The Executive Director of Finance clarified that it was everyone's responsibility to ensure prudent financial management and ensure spending was undertaken in the most appropriate way.
- (v) It was considered that appropriate service levels should be at the heart of scrutiny's budget discussions during 2024/25 by ensuring that there were sufficient funds to deliver statutory services but also by considering what could be done around other areas to reduce spending on statutory services.
- (vi) It was noted that free school meals were funded through the Household Support Fund. The Executive Director advised that questions had been raised about the Household Support fund nationally and councils were waiting for clarification. The Council could not assume that it would continue but was ready if it did so. Members supported the need for the Household Support Fund to continue and that there should be multiple years settlements.
- (vii) Officers advised that in respect of the implications for the schools support block from government being reduced year on year there would be a need in the future to undertake a review of what services could be provided to schools.
- (viii) In respect of funding of improvement recommendations arising from the Ofsted inspection an improvement programme would be developed, along with consideration of how to prioritise funding.

- (ix) Some schools were charging parents for additional curriculum support and these hidden fees and charges were a concern. Officers advised that the underlying principle was that education was free. Schools were able to charge curriculum supplements due to their financial positions. The alternative would be not to offer any additional support at all. Most schools would support disadvantaged families where they could.
- (x) It was noted that the SEND Accountability Board had recently considered a report on Educational Health and Care Plans and a request was made for the Corporate Scrutiny Committee to see that report.

Action: The Assistant Director of Education to circulate the presentation.

- (xi) Members requested an update on the backlog of EHCP reports. Officers confirmed that the statutory target was 20 weeks for the preparation of an EHCP. Performance was now just over 70%, whereas in the former County Council, it had fallen as low as 7%. Significant moves had been made to clear the backlog, but that had led to an unintended consequence of putting pressure on the dedicated schools grant to deliver the Plans.

Commissioning and Partnerships

- (xii) The majority of the pressures within Commissioning and Partnerships was the investment into the Children's Trust Contract Sum.
- (xiii) Clarification was sought on what the one-off investment in the Children's Trust was. Officers advised that it included social worker capacity. There was a pressure on the workforce nationally when recruiting social workers. The Trust currently used a mixture of permanent, agency and managed teams. There were particular pressures on front-end social work teams including vacancies and rising caseloads. The use of agency staff changed on a daily basis and rather than include these costs in the contract sum, a one-off payment was made.

Action: Officers to provide a breakdown of the workforce between permanent, agency and managed teams.

- (xiv) Members sought an explanation as to why there was an increase in demand for services. The Executive Director explained that there were a number of parts including an element of risk aversion when partners referred cases. About 50% of referrals resulted in no further action and the Trust was looking to provide partners with the tools to help with referrals. Also, whilst there was early help, it was often not as early as would be liked.
- (xv) It was welcomed that the Children's Trust budget appeared to be starting to be managed. Officers confirmed that the Trust and both councils had managed to agree the contract sum on time. A Transformation and Efficiency Board had also been established.

Action: Officers to provide details of the projects turned down at the Transformation and Efficiency Board, once known.

Dedicated Schools Grant

- (xvi) A recent report had stated that some of the alternative provision the Council used had been rated as inadequate. Officers confirmed that two of the larger providers the Council sent children to have been rated inadequate and it had precluded from any new pupils being sent to them. Both had now improved, and the Council was happy to send pupils to them again.
- (xvii) The cost of out of area placements was high, and it was queried whether everything was being done to provide more places in North Northamptonshire? Officers explained that a bid had been made to the government for a new alternative provision school in North Northamptonshire, which the government would fund. The Council could choose to build a facility itself, but it would be a significant investment. It was also looking at developing ways to educate pupils as close to home as possible.
- (xviii) How the further academisation of schools may affect the budget was also discussed. Officers confirmed that there would be an impact as some of the services were based on the number of schools.
- (xix) Regarding the impact be on the budget for funding for 2 year olds, officers advised that it was difficult to say at this stage but take up had been assumed, and would be adjusted through the year.
- (xx) The amount of children who did not have a school place due to SEND numbered around 100 children awaiting places.
- (xxi) The requirement slides in the presentation pack should be included in the response to the Executive as it succinctly puts down what is required.
- (xxii) When academy schools excluded a pupil, it put pressure on the authority as it had to support those pupils. It was queried if officers believed that academies were too quick to exclude pupils? In response, officers advised that they worked with all schools to minimise exclusions. However, nationally there was evidence to suggest that academies were quick to exclude. This put pressure on authorities as alternative provision was expensive.
- (xxiii) It was queried whether post-16 provision, particularly for SEND, had improved? It was responded that within North Northamptonshire there was limited Post-16 provision. The breadth of curriculum was an issue as it was very academic with a limited vocational offer.
- (xxiv) It was noted that officers supporting early years were not present at this meeting, it was suggested that the Early Years Strategic Advisor could

provide a briefing note/presentation on early years and answer any subsequent questions.

Action: Officers to examine the possibility of a briefing note/presentation on early years from the Early Years Strategic Advisor.

End of Meeting