

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FINANCE & PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON THURSDAY, 11TH APRIL, 2024

MEMBERS: Councillors: Nawshad Ali (Chair), Sabri Ozaydin (Vice Chair), Nicki Adeleke, Thomas Fawns, Elisa Morreale, Julian Sampson, and Andrew Thorp.

Officers: Tony Theodoulou (Executive Director - People), Olga Bennet (Director of Finance: Capital & Commercial), Peter Nathan (Director of Education), Julian Minta (Head of Fleet & Transport Operations), Sangeeta Brown (Education Resources Manager), Barbara Thurogood (Head of SEN), and Harry Blake-Herbert (Governance Officer).

Also Attending: Cllr Abdul Abdullahi (Cabinet Member for Children's Services), and press.

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Ayten Guzel, Alessandro Georgiou and Paul Pratt, who were substituted by Cllrs Nicki Adeleke, Elisa Morreale and Andrew Thorp, respectively.

2. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Cllr Thomas Fawns declared that he was a governor at Durants School for special educational needs.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 7 March 2024 were **AGREED**.

4. BUDGET FOR SEN CHILDREN'S SERVICES, CARE PACKAGES & TRANSPORT

Cllr Abdul Abdullahi and Peter Nathan introduced and highlighted the key aspects of the report, including but not limited to: the administrations priorities in relation to SEN school places, support and precision care; as well as funding streams, budgetary pressures and intervention services. Work with partners, service performance, legal constraints, and the context of the topic in the borough were also discussed.

In response to Members' queries regarding invest to save developments, officers advised that EY had been commissioned to conduct a review, and recommended long term interventions to allow for the continued development

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of additional places, nurture group provision and the speech and language offer. These provisions were in place for 5 years from 2022, as had been agreed with head teacher colleagues on the Schools Forum, and the reasons for longer term projects were said to include recruitment and impact monitoring.

In response to Members' questions and comments relating to testing children for special educational needs, officers responded that parents, schools and professionals could all request statutory needs assessments. Schools provided SEN support to children where required, and were usually asked to make requests because they are able to provide more information as to the child's performance. A cycle of assessment plan and the activities the school had undertaken in determining a child needed additional support were looked at by the council. The council provide lots of support and information in respect of requests, but were said to receive the highest volume in London, with around 700 new requests per year.

In response to Members' enquiries regarding staffing provided by private companies, officers replied that if carers were providing personal care, these were regulated services and inspected by the CQC. There was said to be a vulnerability where carers were not providing personal care as there was little regulation around this. Some inner London boroughs would place vulnerable young adults in Enfield accommodation, but this was not known to the council until issues arose, at which stage the council would negotiate with the provider to make adequate provision or advise if it was not a suitable location for the individual to be placed. It was added that the council put on a series of events to help parents come to terms with the transition and drop in service between children and adult support provisions.

In response to Members' questions relating to transport, officers advised that when requests were received by transport, these were transferred to the brokerage team who spoke to parents and assessed the education, health and care plans before determining the best and most efficient form of transport for that child. Wherever possible, independent travel training was pursued as it was the best solution for all involved and they tried to transition children who were on busses towards this. Travel training in schools and personal travel budgets which gave parents more flexibility were described as methods which had brought success. The brokerage team also looked at requests in respect of the local offer, with applications that didn't meet the criteria being rejected; parents could appeal this decision and it would go to an appeal panel, who had become more robust, investigative and creative in their dealing of these. There was a high number of single occupancy journeys, but the transport of any individuals in this way was for a reason, which was reviewed on a monthly basis, and there was no alternative means of complying with their statutory duty to transport them. Officers added that they worked closely with parents, and that since insourcing the service, the volume of complaints received regarding transport had dramatically reduced. Staff employed in the transport of children with complex needs were said to be extremely well trained in a variety of practices including first aid and thus were able to deal with a number of eventualities. Examples/ case studies of the

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challenges and costs in meeting their statutory duty to provide transport to children with special educational needs were detailed. The cost of transporting children was said to be a growing issue nationally, and one which could not be sustained, with the Association of Directors of Children's Services calling for legislative change from the government. Had the council continued to outsource the service, it would have cost over £18m, instead of the estimated £13m budgeted, which was in line with other London councils, and methods for reducing this were being explored. Officers explained that routes were designed with special requirements; they then went out to and negotiated with all registered contractors, and awarded the route to the one who came back with the best price; where possible they tried to offer routes locally. The importance of reviewing routes to maximise efficiency and ensure a routine was maintained for those affected was highlighted.

In response to Members' queries relating to reviewing EHCPs, officers responded that they were constrained, in that whilst plans were reviewed; ceasing them required the parents' agreement. The council had recruited a new programme manager and would be appointing three additional advisors to go into schools, review plans and look at the post-14 offer to support young people's needs and prepare them for the transition into adulthood. The council and other local authorities were working with the Department for Education to understand what had created the unsustainable market and bring about legislative reforms. Such plans were said to cost around £13,200 a year, and were given for around 15 years; the cost for a child without these needs attending a standard primary/secondary school was £4,000 to 5,000 a year.

In response to Members' questions and comments regarding new school funding, officers replied that in the last budget the government announced that they were releasing additional funds to support the growth of special educational needs provision. The council had submitted two bids, the bid for a new special school at Portcullis being successful, and the other was being resubmitted. If the council were to fund the building of a new school, this would need to be paid back from the general fund, but the savings would sit in the designated schools fund, which given the health of and challenges to the general fund, was not possible, hence grants had been pursued. Officers explained that there was room available in schools for additional provision; two academies were said to have suitable spaces available, but the academy trust were unwilling to allow them to be used. Officers added that they were pushing the inclusion agenda, as a means of ensuring children felt as valued and visible in mainstream schools as possible.

In response to Members' enquiries relating to children with special educational needs in mainstream schools, officers advised that the promotion of inclusion was the only realistic solution to the unsustainable challenges facing the support of children with special educational needs, but that schools needed more resources to enable this. The Department for Education was embarking on a comprehensive training programme to ensure that staff in schools were suitably trained, but a cash injection was required also. The borough had around 50 children in residential care, each of who's support cost in excess of £100,000 per year. The importance of panels of

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professionals in ensuring resources/ funds were allocated fairly, transparently and consistently was highlighted. Often in the case of children with very complex needs the council, NHS and dedicated schools grant all made contributions.

In response to Members' questions regarding the impact of Covid-19 on early year requests, officers responded that children's social interaction skills had been limited which made assessing whether they had special educational needs more challenging. The introduction/ development of an early year's pathway was being looked at as a means of teaching children the basics they should know/ learn e.g., counting and toilet training. The impact this had on the employment of teaching assistants in primary school was highlighted. Initiatives like family hubs, were said to play a role in supporting attempts to combat the societal challenges of getting parents to recognise their responsibilities in teaching their children the basics.

In response to Members' queries regarding long term future proofing of the service, officers replied that secondary school places would be available, and they were talking to and negotiating with head teachers about how this would be provided. Meridian Water was described as presenting an opportunity for the provision of a special secondary school.

The Panel **AGREED** to note the report outlining the demand, provision and costs of SEND placements, care packages and transport in the borough.

5. WORK PROGRAMME 2023/24

Members **NOTED** the completion of the Work Programme for 2023/24 and that the Finance & Performance Scrutiny Panel Work Programme for 2024/25 would be discussed at the first meeting of the new municipal year.

6. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Members noted that the dates of future meetings would be confirmed following Annual Council on Wednesday 15 May 2024.

The Chair thanked Members and officers for their time and contributions and the meeting ended at 20:16.