

Minutes

CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE

01 February 2024



Meeting held at Committee Room 5 – Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge, UB8 1UW

| | |
|-----|--|
| | <p>Committee Members Present: Councillors Heena Makwana (Chair), Ekta Gohil, Kaushik Banerjee, Kishan Bhatt, Tony Gill, Stuart Mathers, and Jan Sweeting (Opposition Lead)</p> <p>Also Present: Tony Little (Co-Opted Member)</p> <p>Officers Present: Debbie Scarborough (Adult & Community Learning - Service Manager) Andy Goodwin (Head of Strategic Finance) Sheilender Pathak (Head of Finance - Children's and SEND) and Ryan Dell (Democratic Services Officer)</p> |
| 59. | <p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies were received from Councillor Rita Judge with Councillor Stuart Mathers substituting.</p> <p>Apologies were also received from Councillor Becky Haggar OBE with Councillor Ekta Gohil substituting.</p> <p>Apologies were also received from Councillor Peter Smallwood with Councillor Kaushik Banerjee substituting.</p> |
| 60. | <p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>None.</p> |
| 61. | <p>MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the previous meeting be agreed.</p> |
| 62. | <p>TO CONFIRM THAT THE ITEMS OF BUSINESS MARKED AS PART I WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THAT THE ITEMS MARKED AS PART II WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE (<i>Agenda Item 4</i>)</p> |

63. **LEARN HILLINGDON ANNUAL REPORT** (*Agenda Item 5*)

Officers introduced the Learn Hillingdon Self-Assessment Annual Review.

A number of challenges and achievements were noted, including the move to a new site at the Civic Centre, and 91% achievement rates among learners.

The focus on vocational courses had resulted in 49% of learners gaining or maintaining employment. Officers highlighted the need to strengthen partnerships, particularly internal ones within the Council, aiming to collaborate with other services, such as mental health support, to better assist residents.

Capturing progression data had proved challenging, but efforts were ongoing. Despite the self-assessment identifying areas for improvement, the service's intention remained clear: targeting the most disadvantaged learners, primarily those with low skills, low-paying jobs, or unemployed individuals. The service aimed to emphasise learning as a transformative tool for adults.

Officers stressed the overall quality of provision, citing mechanisms in place for continuous improvement. Impact data reflected positive outcomes, with minimal behaviour and attitude issues reported, attributing this to the commitment of adult learners. The introduction of an Advisory Board in the last academic year marked a positive step.

In summary, the Learn Hillingdon annual report showcased achievements and challenges in providing quality adult education. The service's commitment to addressing disparities and continuously improving was noted.

Members noted the strong bias towards female learners. Officers explained that this bias stemmed from targeting the most disadvantaged residents, predominantly women facing part-time or low-paid work and a skills gap. The daytime provision was designed to accommodate their schedules, but efforts to recruit more men included specialised courses, such as cookery classes, which had proven successful.

The age profile of learners was primarily between 25 and 95 years, and reference was made to a former learner who was aged 100. The majority of learners were aged 30-65.

Members highlighted the ongoing issue of strengthening partnerships and raised concerns about the reduced use of printed material, the decreased building capacity, and the poor retention of individuals in mental health courses.

Officers addressed the concerns by first discussing the challenges related to the retention of learners in mental health courses. Retention was a significant issue due to the mild to moderate mental health issues faced by adult learners. Personal targets, such as getting to class on time, could be hindered by factors like depression, anxiety, or medication side effects. Despite efforts to structure courses differently and gradually increase their duration, the nature of mental health issues made retention difficult to address comprehensively.

Regarding the use of printed material, officers acknowledged the shift away from brochures, with the understanding that online platforms were more dynamic and allowed for more frequent updates. Learners, especially those in English, maths, and

ESOL courses, often relied on word of mouth for information. Although some learners, particularly those interested in personal development courses, expressed a preference for printed brochures, the decision to prioritise online platforms was driven by sustainability and adaptability needs.

Concerning the reduced building capacity, officers highlighted the challenges faced due to changes in Harlington School. The team had adapted by relocating some provision to the Civic Centre and utilising alternative spaces in the community, such as a local children's centre. The goal was to maintain the quality of provision despite reduced physical capacity.

Members also asked about external partnerships to enhance employability, connections with local businesses, and community building. Officers acknowledged the importance of strengthening partnerships with employers and recognised that there was room for improvement. Officers explained that the target group, individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, often faced challenges in pursuing additional courses. Some also felt the need to leave education and enter employment earlier due to the cost-of-living crisis, which meant that they were unable to stay on courses and gain the skills/ qualifications that may lead to a better job. There were also a small number of cases where learners felt that they had to leave courses because of pressure from Job Centre Plus for them to get into work. A number of learners had reported that they were being told by Job Centre Plus that they should be available for work all day every day, and that a class stopped them looking for work which meant that the learners were terrified of losing their benefits. Officers had been liaising with Job Centre Plus about this.

A key area of work involved training teaching assistants and the service was involved with a number of schools, building those partnerships. Officers expressed the need to enhance partnerships further and explore collaborations with local colleges.

Officers also discussed ongoing efforts to establish connections between the Council and potential employers, emphasising the need for a strategic role within the Council to maximise benefits for residents. Officers expressed a desire to work across different directorates, collaborating with senior officers to identify needs and avoid duplication. Careers fairs could attract a number of employers, so there was some partnership working, however this could be improved.

In response to the suggestion of creating a community of alumni, officers expressed enthusiasm for the idea and acknowledged its potential for sharing success stories and motivating learners. Officers recognised the absence of a structured alumni program and expressed intent to explore and implement such initiatives.

Members commended the service on its success and inquired about funding sources, specifically the contributions from the Greater London Authority (GLA) and national funding. Officers explained that they had successfully secured an additional £200,000 in grant funding, contributing to their budget for the current academic year. Officers discussed how funding was influenced by the availability of funds and the service's track record. There was a three-year cycle of funding which was allocated to the top providers, of which Hillingdon was one. This funding contributed to the Multiply project which was about making maths accessible. Officers also applied for and were successful in gaining some funding for the Holiday Activities and Food Program.

The service had set up an Enterprise Club whereby learners were pulling together a

food bank, clothes bank, toys bank and a book bank.

The service had also accessed some funding for development around mentoring. Three staff members took part in this and there was capacity for a further two places.

The service was always looking for new avenues of funding and were looking into staffing around writing bids.

Members raised questions about the strategic use of different spaces across the borough, expressing concerns about limitations in locations, reductions in language courses, and the need for a broader course offer. Officers discussed their bid for additional funding and highlighted successful initiatives funded by the GLA, such as the Holiday Activities and Food Program. Officers shared examples of creative courses and mentioned ongoing efforts to explore opportunities for growth.

Officers acknowledged the limitations in digital resources and the challenges of working within corporate communication guidelines for website design. Officers expressed interest in improving the website's attractiveness while navigating within the established branding framework.

Reference was made to the Youth Council and Parliament week. It was noted that the local MP had attended Parliament Week and explained that this was part of the active citizenship theme. Higher-level ESOL learners participated in sessions leading up to the event, focusing on research, reading, writing, and especially speaking and listening skills. They engaged in a formal debate on a chosen topic, with previous subjects including issues such as sugar tax.

Officers highlighted the broader theme of active citizenship, with a current focus on making learners aware of upcoming elections, voter registration, and the importance of civic engagement. Plans for the next year included bringing in a speaker from Amnesty International to discuss incorporating human rights into the context of the learners, such as personal safety at education centres. Officers emphasised that active citizenship extends beyond international issues, often focusing on practical local concerns. The goal was to empower learners to recognise their voice and agency in their local area or community. Officers concluded by highlighting the significance of small achievements for learners who may not have felt they had a voice before.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the report and questioned officers on the report.

64. **2024/25 BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR SERVICES WITHIN THE REMIT OF CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE** (*Agenda Item 6*)

Officers introduced the budget proposals report. This was the second time that officers had attended the Select Committee for the new budget cycle, and this report contained detailed budget proposals within the remit of this Select Committee. The feedback from the Committee would be included in the budget report to be presented to the February Cabinet to approve the proposals to Full Council.

In terms of revenue monitoring for 2023/24, there was an underspend of £2,000, with the services within the Committee's remit forecasting an underspend of £236,000. The underspend was primarily driven by a reduction in the cost of supporting Looked After Children alongside a staffing underspend.

There were £1.44 million of savings to be delivered in 2023/24, with £415,000 recorded at Amber II, indicating potential issues in delivering the savings. £123,000 of this related to the adult education review and the remaining balance related to fees and charges.

Officers discussed the Medium Term Financial Forecast (MTFF) and the Council's budget strategy. The savings requirement up to 2028/29 was estimated to be £51 million, with a savings program of £33.4 million, leaving a residual gap of £17.6 million. Exceptional inflation was the single largest factor, forecast to add £48.1 million over the five-year period.

Of the £33.4 million, £15.8 million was required in 2024/25. Within this program £3.8 million fell within the remit of this Committee, with £1.7 million of that balance being required next year. The largest savings included in next year's proposals included:

- £0.8 million for realigning Staffing budgets based on the current occupancy rates;
- £0.5 million for improving and modernizing the fostering offer; and
- £0.3 million for related to prevention work from the stronger families program with the balance coming from a number of smaller items set out in the report.

Children's social care placements continued to drive much of the inflationary requirement with a forecast uplift of 4.2% in 2024/25 before reducing down to 3% in the medium term. The total requirement for the remit of this Committee was £1 million for inflationary uplifts against the £48 million included in the overall strategy with children's social care placements accounting for £5 million of this value; forecast pay award accounting for a further £6 million; £2 million for other contracted expenditure and this is being offset by forecast increase of gross income of £2 million. Officers highlighted uncertainties beyond 2024/25, as Central Government had only provided funding up to that point.

Service pressures were forecast to add £24 million. This was predominantly from the impact of demographic growth. Services within the remit of this Committee accounted for £1 million of that balance. There was roughly £2.2 million from increases in demand for children's social care, being offset by a reduction in the funding required to support Asylum Seeker Services.

Corporate items added £14 million of the savings requirement, £7 million of which was driven by the Council's borrowing requirement for the capital program and a further £5 million related to TfL concessionary fares as a result of travel returning to pre-pandemic levels. These two areas sat outside of the remit of this committee.

The capital program proposed by the Council was £218 million up to 2028/29. Within this Committee's remit, there was a program of £42 million, with £1.7 million allocated to increasing special education needs places and £2.7 million for Scout and Guide group facilities.

Members asked about capital receipts and officers noted there were £75 million within the capital programme. Officers were reviewing assets, and looking into disposing of any assets that were deemed surplus to requirements. It was reiterated that the capital programme budget was over £218 million and so more assets were being put in than

taken out, and by selling surplus assets, officers would be able to reduce the Council's potential borrowing for the future and to fund transformation work to deliver the £33.4 million of savings within the MTFF.

Members expressed concern that this Committee was the only one receiving the budget report after the public consultation with residents had concluded.

Members noted the importance of balancing the budget and noted concerns relating to the savings programme being sufficient only if £4.9m funding allocated by the Government in core Adult Social Care spending was retained. Members further noted concerns about the current MTFF strategy being dependent on the achievements of around £75 million in asset sales. Members asked how certain officers could be at these scenarios being achieved.

Officers responded by explaining the Council's reserves, low-risk budget strategy, and the uncertainties in central government funding beyond 2024/25. Officers emphasised the prudence of using a cash-flat strategy and discussed the challenges and legal requirements in setting a balanced budget.

There were reserves of £26.8 million and there were also earmarked reserves. In February Cabinet each year the Section 151 Officer assessed the level of balances that the Council needs and the risks it is exposed to. For 2023/24 this was set at £22 million, and the Council was currently at £4.8 million above this. Then there were earmarked reserves which were held for specific risks. Officers went with a low-risk budget strategy, and so could operate with a low level of reserves. It was reiterated that central government had only provided funding up until the end of 2024/25. The Council's budget strategy was predicting cash flat settlements from 2025/26 onwards. Legally, the Council had to set a balanced budget, but would not look to balance the whole five-year budget at this stage given the uncertainty of the funding position.

Members asked about the high needs deficit, and about forecasting to have greater confidence in this expenditure area for next year. There had been a lot of work and a lot of resources put into that area now so systems were improving. There were a lot of staff that were new to the area so they were working hard to improve those systems.

Members asked if the funds available to schools would increase or decrease in real terms. There was a 1.7% increase in terms of the schools' block DSG allocations for 2024/25. In addition, there was a Teachers Pay award specific grant outside of the DSG set to be confirmed in April, with provisional figures of 1.7%. There would also be a specific teachers pension grant, for which there was no provisional figure but also due to be announced in April. When asked about these matching forecasts for inflation, it was noted that the CPI forecast was 7% in 2023, 3% in 2024, and 2% from 2025, and so the increases were above the CPI position.

Members then asked about the Dedicated Schools' Budget deficit of £26.4 million, £187,000 due to high needs. Members inquired about the Council's Plan B if the Government did not extend the override and the deficit needed to be paid back from general balances. The Council had submitted a DSG (Dedicated Schools Grant) management plan in December to bring the deficit back into balance over five to seven years. This was partly reliant on contributions from the DfE (Department for Education), and feedback was awaited on this. The statutory override was a national issue, and the sector did not expect it to end in the medium term.

Members noted concerns around the budget, particularly with regards to the DSG, and

noted the possible need to sell assets quickly to meet commitments. It appeared that delays in the capital building programme, particular for SEND places had meant that there were now high transport costs.

Members asked what other mechanisms the Council had in its approach to ensure that there was resilience. In terms of mitigating against low reserves, officers noted the low-risk approach. 7% inflation was forecast for 2023, and when approaching for inflation uplifts on contracted expenditure, this ran a year behind and so officers had gone with 7%. In terms of the rate of the sales of the capital receipts, officers noted that Hillingdon had sufficient headroom in the capital receipt position to fund the DSG safety valve agreement as it currently stood and the transformation work being deployed throughout the Council to deliver the savings program. Furthermore, Hillingdon was a low-debt authority and officers would not be proposing to increase the debt.

Members highlighted the redesign of the Harlington site and the potential restriction on EHCPs. In terms of the impact on mainstream schools, one of the key objectives of the DSG management plan was to step down high-cost placements.

Members commended the underspend of around £236,000 for services within this Committee's remit and asked how these funds might be reallocated or utilised in other service areas within the portfolio. Officers re-iterated that the overall underspend was £2,000 and it was explained that the underspend was managed across the entire Council and helped balance out financial positions. Savings programmes were carefully planned, and if there are any issues in delivery, underspending in other areas helped manage the overall financial strategy.

Members expressed concerns about using earmark reserves and asked for clarity on investments and associated risks. Officers explained that Hillingdon historically has had low debt and followed a low-risk approach, not engaging in high-risk commercial investments. Most capital investment was for service delivery and so Hillingdon had not exposed itself to commercial risk.

Members asked about the reduction in Looked After Children costs in 2024/25 and the growth in 2025/26. Officers explained that the reduction was due to a change in service delivery, stepping down residential clients into semi-independent placements, achieving lower unit costs. Officers had built the underspend into the budget strategy for next year and so while there was a projected 2% increase in the number of children being looked after, the overall budget could still be reduced.

The Chair noted that the Committee would submit comments to Cabinet. Labour Members noted that they had concerns around the budget, with specific reference to high-needs and gave to officers their own draft comments.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- 1. Noted the budget projections contained in the report; and**
- 2. Delegated to the Democratic Services Officer in conjunction with the Chairman (and in consultation with the Opposition Lead) to agree comments to be submitted to Cabinet.**

| | |
|-----|---|
| 65. | <p>MAJOR REVIEW - UPDATED SCOPING REPORT (<i>Agenda Item 7</i>)</p> <p>At the previous Select Committee, a draft scoping report on the review into persistent absenteeism was presented. Following updates from Members, an updated scoping report was presented to the Committee.</p> <p>Members noted concern that the scoping report listed only four witness sessions and only one with schools, given the importance of obtaining feedback from these stakeholders.</p> <p>Members also noted the possibility of tying this review in with the Health and Social Care Select Committee’s review into mental health.</p> <p>Members noted the importance of tying in the witness sessions with the Terms of Reference and identified gaps in this. Specific gaps related to Terms of Reference 4 (<i>‘to understand and explore the nature of partnership working in relation to persistent absenteeism in statutory school age children in Hillingdon, including parents/ carers, young people, teachers, officers and other stakeholders’</i>) and 6 (<i>‘to explore the measures in place for child protection and safeguarding in relation to attendance’</i>). It was therefore noted that additional witness sessions may be required to fill these gaps.</p> <p>The Chair noted the importance of the attendance of Members at witness sessions.</p> <p>Members noted the importance of capturing the voice of the child and highlighted that there may be difficulties in securing the participation of young people at witness sessions. Members highlighted the need for careful and creative management of this, and further noted the possibility of utilising indirect feedback as an alternative to a formal witness session.</p> <p>Members highlighted the draft date of 18 April 2024 for a witness session with teachers/ school attendance officers and noted that April was a particularly busy time for schools and that the timing of this session may need to be reconsidered. This may also aid in securing young people as witnesses.</p> <p>Members suggested adding a consideration of demographic/ cultural and North/ South differences within the review.</p> <p>Suggestions were made of reviewing school’s implementation of attendance policies; of ensuring that the review/ report does not solely focus on COVID-19 as the primary causal factor; and on the possibility of engaging the Youth Parliament within the review.</p> <p>Members further suggested that there were a number of youth workers who may be able to engage with young people on the Committee’s behalf.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Committee commented on and considered the scoping report to initiate the review.</p> |
| 66. | <p>FORWARD PLAN (<i>Agenda Item 8</i>)</p> <p>Members considered the Forward Plan.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families and Education Select Committee noted the Cabinet Forward Plan</p> |

| | |
|-----|---|
| 67. | <p>WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 9)</p> <p>Members noted that the Work Programme showed a heavy agenda for the March meeting and suggested moving the 'Twice Yearly School Places Planning Report' from the March meeting to April. This may aid in considering admissions to Year 7 for next September as well as Reception numbers.</p> <p>Members also enquired about receiving an audit of pupil numbers from October 2023. This may aid in Members' understanding and discussion on this topic.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families and Education Select Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Considered the report; and 2. Asked officers to investigate the feasibility of moving the Twice-Yearly School Places Planning Report from March 2024 to April 2024. |
| | <p>The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 8.30 pm.</p> |

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Ryan Dell on democratic@hillingdon.gov.uk. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.