

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 4 January 2021

PRESENT – Councillors C L B Hughes (Chair), Bartch, Mrs Culley, Ali, Crudass, Lister, Renton and Snedker

STATUTORY CO-OPTees – None

NON-STATUTORY CO-OPTees – None

APOLOGIES – Councillors Bell and Lucas; Carly Spence Tim Fisher, Nick Lindsay and John Armitage

ABSENT – Malcolm Frank, Maura Regan and Janet Woodcock

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Carla Scaith (Darlington Parent Carer Forum) and Marjory Knowles (Skerne Park Community Enterprise Association)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Sharon Raine (Head of Performance and Transformation), Allison Hill (Democratic Officer), Tony Murphy (Head of Education and Inclusion), Nicola Davies (Early Years Project Officer), Helen Ellison (Head of Education Partnerships), Christine Shields (Assistant Director Commissioning, Performance and Transformation), Chris Bell (Head of Service) and Elizabeth Davison (Assistant Director Resources)

CYP19 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

Submitted – A report (previously circulated) of the Chief Officers Executive which had been considered by Cabinet at its meeting held on 8 December 2020, in relation to the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2021/22 to 2024/25, including setting a budget and council tax increase for 2021/22.

It was reported that the Council had faced significant challenges over the last decade following the economic downturn and reduction in public sector spending; that to date, the Council had been successful in responding to these challenges but this was becoming increasingly difficult, particularly in respect of a growing elderly population, pressure in the children's social care sector and the major economic impact of Covid-19 which had a direct impact on the Council's finances this year.

The submitted report outlined details of the core offer budget, which had been agreed following a significant consultation exercise in 2016 and allowed reduced expenditure and services to a risk based minimum level with a small investment fund of £2.5m per year. It was noted that in subsequent MTFP's unallocated balances of £6.5m were invested in five areas, namely Community Safety, maintaining an attractive street scene, maintaining a vibrant town centre, developing an attractive visitor economy and neighbourhood renewal.

The submitted report highlighted areas of saving within the plan and areas of pressure, in particular the significant effect of Coronavirus pandemic on the Council's expenditure and income budgets. It was reported that estimates had been made on the direct service impact of the pandemic in 2021/22 with the assumption services

would return to normal in 2022/23; and Members noted the projected expenditure for 2021/22 of £95m.

Reference was made to projected income, including core grant funding to Local Government; in particular the continuation of the Sales, Fees and Charges recompense scheme from April to June 2021 which was estimated to be £0.616m; and the increase in Council Tax and National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR), which would provide an increase in income over the period of the MTFP. Members noted the projected income of £94m for 2021/2022.

Reference was made to the Futures Fund allocation, with £3.401m committed to the futures fund themes to date with a balance of £0.699m remaining; and Members noted the recommendation to utilise £0.914m of the unallocated balances to continue the Futures Fund ongoing priorities and commitments into 2024/25.

It was reported that by 2024/2025 the projected general fund balance was £3.504m however this relied on building around 433 Band D equivalent houses per year, no significant overspending, assumptions of a cash equivalent position materialising in the settlement and a Council Tax increase of 1.99 per cent and a further 3 per cent Social care precept totalling 4.99 per cent.

Members discussed in particular the yearly increase in costs for children's services and children coming into care and questioned if this was the appropriate action to be taken and suggested that there was a lot of learning and best practice in other authorities and it was time to make some changes.

Chris Bell, Head of Service, Children's Services, advised Members of the ongoing partnership work with Leeds City Council, Stronger Families Programme, with funding from the Department for Education, which has a key focus on early intervention and supporting families working over the last 12 to 18 months; expansion of the Family Group Conference service; and it was noted that there was a decrease in the number of children coming into the looked after system.

Members questions related to the implications of no increase to spending for other services i.e. Voluntary Sector, Youth Offending and Anti-social behavior and the Assistant Director of Commissioning, Performance and Transformation advised Members of the work with the Commissioning Unit to examine ways to bring placement costs down; utilising models of practice from other authorities that could be implemented locally to bring costs down; and assured Members that plans were being looked at to address all these issues.

Members also referred to future investment in two schools with the units that had been commissioned at Red Hall Primary School and Rise Carr College to provide additional places for children with specialist needs and were advised that both projects were on track for admitting pupils in the next academic year.

The Chair agreed that investment needed to be made to ultimately save in the future and also acknowledged the economic down turn and the fight against Covid and that many families were struggling through these testing times.

The Assistant Director of Commissioning, Performance and Transformation advised

Members also of the work with Family Group Conferences, Early Help Teams, within the Community and working strongly with the voluntary sector including pilot projects around families with children who are vulnerable and experiencing real stress and challenge; and also regional and sub-regional work which is outlined in the Children and Young People Plan around the needs of the child once they have been placed.

RESOLVED – (a) That this Scrutiny Committee has no comment to make on the proposed schedule of fees and charges for those services within its remit; supports the Council Tax increase of 1.99 per cent plus the 3.00 per cent adult social care precept for the next financial year; and supports the Futures Fund continuation into 2024/25.

(b) That the comments made by Members of this Scrutiny regarding children's services be forwarded as part of the consultation process of the MTFP.