

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 10 January 2022

PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS WAS NOT A FORMALLY CONSTITUTED MEETING, AND THAT THIS IS A 'NOTE' OF THE INFORMAL MEETING THAT TOOK PLACE.

PRESENT – Councillors Ali, Crudass (Chair), Mrs Culley, C. Hughes, Lucas, Renton, Snedker, Sowerby and Willis

STATUTORY CO-OPTees – None

NON-STATUTORY CO-OPTees – John Armitage and Nick Lindsay

APOLOGIES – Councillors Bell and Lister, Tim Fisher

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillor Clarke

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Elizabeth Davison (Group Director of Operations), Chris Bell (Assistant Director of Children's Services), Brett Nielsen (Assistant Director Resources), Tony Murphy (Head of Education and Inclusion) and Allison Hill (Democratic Officer)

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Snedker declared a non-pecuniary interest in the item below.

MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

The Assistant Director Resources submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that Members give consideration to the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2022/23 to 2025/26.

In introducing the report, the Group Director of Operations reminded Members of the MTFP Briefing that was delivered to Members in December outlining the overall position of the MTFP, and advised that Members now had the opportunity to ask questions relating to the remit of this Scrutiny Committee and to forward any views or comments to the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee for consideration at its meeting scheduled to be held on 20 January 2022.

The Group Director of Operations provided an update on the finance settlement which had been received subsequent to the draft MTFP.

It was reported that the Council Tax and Precept levels remained as expected at 2 per cent and 1 per cent respectively; that the £1.5B additional funding announced in the Autumn Statement had been split into £822M Services Grant and £636M Social Care Grant; the Council would be receiving £1.579M from the Services Grant and £1.162M from the Social Care Grant, which was higher than the estimate included within the draft MTFP; and Members were advised that the Services Grant was a one-off payment whilst a further review of Local Government funding was conducted.

Members were also advised that the New Homes Bonus had been extended for a further year, and that this would net a further £1.4M above anticipated levels. It was reported that there were also a number of reductions from initial draft figures, however overall there would be an additional £1.073M funding for 2022/23.

Members discussed in particular with the Assistant Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director of Resources the level of unpredictability within Children's Services and the Strengthening Families Programme which was key to the improvement journey and providing high quality services and the challenges faced which were still ongoing from the pandemic; how the level of funding for Children's Services is measured and set and it was noted that there had been a significant increase in funding over recent years mirrored by the increase in expenditure; the challenges around placement markets which was to undergo some national changes in Spring 2022; it was noted that the overspend at the year end for Children's Social Care which was approximately £0.5M was due to Covid costs; how Adoption Tees Valley funding was calculated and the ongoing work in relation to calculating charges to each of the five Tees Valley authorities; and ongoing work to reduce the costs in relation to Inter Agency Fees.

Members also discussed the known pressures and efficiencies in relation to Social Care staffing and the increased demand in relation to public funds and the number of children requiring support.

Scrutiny Members asked the Assistant Director of Children's Services, if extra funding could be made available for Children's Services where this would be best allocated and focussed. His response was that the area he would most seek to expand would be the Early Help offer, to create more Early Help practitioner posts and for the service to be larger, more accessible and more visible to local communities, children and families in Darlington.

Members agreed that access to Early Help helps families address their issues early and if successful prevents expensive and intrusive statutory interventions at a point in the future, thus being both the right thing to do and a more financially viable way of supporting families; and is at the very heart of the Strengthening Families journey already being undertaken working with families.

(a) That, the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee be advised that, following consideration, the following is this Scrutiny's views on the draft Medium Term Financial Plan 2022/23 to 2025/26:

- (i) If additional funding became available Cabinet should give consideration to increasing the budget allocation to Early Help Services to prevent expensive and intrusive statutory interventions in the future and is therefore a more financially viable way of supporting families.

(b) That the Chair, in consultation with the Lead Scrutiny Officers supporting this Scrutiny Committee, be given authority to agree the Notes of this Meeting of the Committee, to enable the Notes to be considered at a Special Meeting of the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee, scheduled to be held on 20 January 2022.