

People Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Monday, 26th September, 2022.

Present:- Councillors Qaseem (Chair), Bal, Basra, Begum, Brooker, Matloob and Sandhu

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillor Ali

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor P. Bedi and Neil Bolton-Heaton

PART 1

ONE MINUTE SILENCE

The Panel held a one-minute silence at the start of the meeting to pay respect to the late Queen Elizabeth II.

5. Declarations of Interest

Councillor (Cllr) Bal declared that he was a trustee of the James Elliman Trust.

Cllr Brooker declared that he was the Chair of Finance and Audit at St Mary's Farnham Royal CE Primary School, and Governor at Ryvers School.

Cllr Basra declared that she worked in the education sector.

Cllrs Bal, Brooker, and Basra remained and took participated in the meeting.

6. Minutes of the Meeting held on 31 March 2022

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 31 March 2022 be approved as a correct record, subject to it being noted that Cllr Brooker had stated that he was the Governor for Special Needs at St Mary's Farnham Royal CE Primary School.

7. Minutes of the Meeting held on 15 June 2022

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 June 2022 be approved as a correct record.

8. Member Questions

Responses to Members' Questions had yet to be received in respect of the following queries:

31 March 2022 - Minute 36 – Re-procurement of Adult Social Care Domiciliary Care Contracts: Report back on the question of actual figures clawed back from unspent money for 31 March 2022 financial year ended.

15 June 2022 - Minute 2 – Re-Procurement of Community Equipment Service: Update on feedback from users of the service, their experiences, as well as further details relating to economies of scale.

9. Home to School Travel Assistance and Post 16 Travel Assistance Policies - Consultation Feedback

The Associate Director, Education & Inclusion introduced a report on the Home to School Travel Assistance and Post 16 Travel Assistance Policies – Consultation Feedback. The Associate Director, Education & Inclusion and the Executive Director for Education & Inclusion responded to Members' questions and comments as set out below.

A Member asked who provided the bursary of £1500 for post 16 students in education. Officers responded that the Government provided Post 16 bursaries to schools and colleges and those eligible for transport would also be eligible for the Post 16 bursary.

A Member expressed concerns that with the rising cost of living, it would not be appropriate to expect parents to personally pay £750 towards Post 16 travel costs. Officers reassured the Panel that parents would not be expected to pay anything.

A Member noted from the feedback, that 58 responses had been received and asked for the number of people that were currently being provided with transport. Officers responded that whilst the actual number could not be provided at this point, approximately 500 people used the service. Officers could not speculate on the low responses but confirmed that wide consultation had been targeted at all current users of the service to encourage as many people to respond as possible...

A Member asked why so many people disagreed to the question about the Council's proposal to encourage more young people and families to use travel bursary to make their travel arrangements to school/college. Officers responded that although one could only speculate, it may be that the preference was to use the bursary towards education rather than transport.

A Member asked why children in faith and single sex schools did not qualify to receive travel assistance. Officers explained that there was an eligibility criteria, which depended on the schools the children attended and the special educational needs (SEND) and disabilities of the children. Eligibility for transport was assessed on an individual basis. It was also highlighted that there was no statutory responsibility to provide transport for faith or single sex schools, unless the child had special needs.

A Member asked why so many children from different parts of the borough were being sent to Langley Academy. Officers explained that this was mostly due to parental choice but eligible pupils with SEND who attended faith or single sex schools were provided with transport. However, if there was schools close to the children's homes that met their needs, but the parents then chose to send them to schools far away, this would be classed as parental choice and would therefore not be eligible for transport.

A member highlighted that parents were sometimes forced to send their children to schools that were far away from their homes, and were not allocated any of their preferences. Officers explained school places were allocated as per the schools' admission criteria, and mitigation measures were considered as required.

(18. 57 – the meeting was paused for a short moment and resumed almost immediately).

A member commented that the contributory bursary of £750 was too steep, given that students would be required to purchase books and equipment for their studies. Officers responded that the annual contribution of £750 proposed for travel assistance for those aged 16-18 (19 if continuing course) was reasonable, compared to fees charged by other councils (as set out in table on page 18 of the report) and comparable neighbouring authorities such as Buckinghamshire.

Members asked about the cost of providing the independent travel training. Officers explained that this would be reviewed once the policy had been approved, and that savings would be based on the type of travel used by the child. Details including training provider would be explored after a decision had been made.

A member asked how confident officers were that training of up to 15 children/young people could be achieved. Officers explained that although 15 children had been identified, no assessment had yet been carried out. The aim was to support young people to become independent if they were able to, and children would not be forced if deemed not be required. There was also potential for this number to rise or drop.

A Member asked about the Travel Bursary value based on Distance Bands (based on shortest driving route) and asked whether it would also be based on children's needs. Officers responded that the sum was based on distance as parents would be transporting their children to school.

A Member asked if the travel bursary valued would be adjusted to take account of inflation and rising costs. It was explained that fees were set currently and officers may need to look at the flexibility of reviewing fees annually. The suggestion to review more frequently would need to be looked at bearing in mind that the Council's costs would also rise simultaneously.

A Member asked whether the removal of travel assistance to faith schools and same sex establishments would affect the social and academic needs of

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existing pupils. Officers responded that the Council had to abide by statutory duties and obligations and balance parents' needs accordingly.

A Member asked whether sufficient notice had been given to parents of the cessation of existing provision at the end of 2022/23 academic year, and the length of the notice period. Officers responded that transport would cease from September 2023 and the policy would commence once agreed by the Cabinet.

A member asked how families with more than one child attending faith/same sex schools would cope with managing the school run once the policy was introduced. Officers advised that provisions allowed for exceptions to be made. Parents could appeal and decisions would be made on a case-by-case basis.

A Member asked whether consideration could be given to allowing a different contributory figure to the proposed £750 towards transport costs. Officers responded that comparison had been made with other councils and this figure had been considered by Slough Borough Council (SBC). Officers would feed this issue back to Cabinet and there was no clarity as what would be the recommended charge at this stage.

A Member suggested that there were still many areas that required further clarification including, costs, removal of travel assistance to faith schools and same sex establishments and independent travel training provision. Officers would therefore need to report back to the Panel so that it could assess the effects of the changes to users and ascertain how the changes had impacted on their experiences.

The Panel did not believe that realistic comparison on the contribution to travel assistance should be made with Buckinghamshire, given that Slough had a higher level of deprivation than this neighbouring authority.

Under Rule 30, Councillor (Cllr) Ali expressed concerns about the issue of parental choice where parents could choose the school they wished for their children to attend. The proposed change of policy would mean that if they selected a faith school, from September 2023, they would not qualify for assistance with travel. This time frame would not be sufficient for those with children already attending faith schools, the change would also result in some parents having to move their children to different schools. Cllr Ali suggested that the change should be phased out and put in place in September 2024 instead of 2023 to allow current pupils to complete their education. The Council could not base its decision to make these changes on such low responses – 58 out of 500 he considered was very insufficient.

Officers explained that parents were not obliged to use the travel bursary but they could access it at any time.

At the conclusion of the discussions, the recommendations below were moved, seconded, and agreed:

Resolved - That the following recommendations be made to Cabinet:

- a) That the Council make provision for children who are at a critical stage of their education (be it faith school, single sex or far away from home), if the Home to School Travel policy (5-16) impact them detrimentally, then according to the mitigating circumstances, the Council allow them to continue with their current service provision and undertake a review on a 6 monthly basis.
- b) That the Council reconsider the value of travel bursary (for 5-16 and post 16) based on the complexity of children's needs and undertake a review on a 4 monthly basis to make adjustments for the rising rate of inflation.
- c) That the consultation period is extended since it was insufficient with a very low response rate of approximately 11%.

10. Members' Attendance Record

Resolved – That Members' Attendance record 2022-23 be noted.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.29 pm)