

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 25 November 2014 at 6.30pm

WRITTEN MINUTES – PART A

Present: Councillor Sara Bashford (Chairman)
Councillors Sean Fitzsimons (Vice-Chairman), Margaret Bird, Simon Brew,
Bernadette Khan, Matthew Kyeremeh, Stephen Mann and Andrew Pelling

Co-opted members:

Parent Governor Representative	James Collins
Parent Governor representative	Vinoo John
Teacher Representative	Dave Harvey

Also in attendance: Cllr Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Learning
Cllr Maria Gatland, Shadow Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Learning

Representatives of three academy chains (see minute 25/14)

A20/14 MINUTES

RESOLVED THAT:

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 October be signed as a correct record with the following amendment:

On page 8, the following should have been added after the sentence commencing '*Members stressed the effectiveness of offering hands-on support*':

'Members affirmed that employing such family aids to provide early years intervention could help mitigate the shortage of social services staff.'

A21/14 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were sent by Cllr Audsley and Elaine Jones (Diocesan Representative).

Apologies were also sent by Stuart Roberts, Executive Head Teacher (Synaptic Trust), who had provided written answers to questions on the work of the Trust.

Sub-Committee members expressed their deep disappointment at the absence of any representative of the Harris Academy Federation at the meeting and at the failure to provide any information on the work of the Federation ahead of the meeting.

A22/14 DISCLOSURE OF INTEREST

There were none.

However, the following Members wished their involvement as governors noted in the minutes:

- Cllr Sara Bashford: governor at Greenvale Primary School
- Cllr Margaret Bird: governor at Oasis Byron and recently resigned from Step Applegarth
- Cllr Bernadette Khan: governor at Gonville Primary Academy
- James Collins: Chair of governors at Woodcote Primary School, Vice-Chair at the Crescent Primary School and Parent Governor at Harris Academy (Purley)
- Vinoo John: Chair of governors at Park Hill Junior School and Governor at the Crescent Primary School
- Dave Harvey: governor at Elmwood Junior School

A23/14 URGENT BUSINESS

There was none.

A24/14 EXEMPT ITEMS

There were none.

A25/14 CROYDON'S ACADEMIES AND FREE SCHOOLS (agenda item 6)

The following officers and academy representatives were in attendance:

- Sylvia McNamara, Director of Learning and Inclusion, CFL
- David Butler, Strategic Lead, Teaching and Learning, CFL

- Andy Yarrow, Regional Academies Director (London and South-East), Oasis Community Learning
- Mark Ducker, Executive Principal of the Step Academy Trust
- Simon Wood, Executive Principal (Croydon and Sussex), Reach2 Academy Trust

The Chair thanked for the three academy chains representatives for giving up their time to attend the meeting.

Council officers explained differences between the local authority's relationship to academy schools and free schools: with the former, the L.A. can go out to competition to select an academy sponsor. With the latter, the free school liaises solely with the DfE in its early stages and the L.A. has no contact with it at all. Therefore the local authority has more ability to plan strategically with the former than the latter.

Council officers praised the willingness of the three academy representatives in attendance to work with council officers.

Members asked council officers whether they encouraged remaining maintained schools to academies. Officers explained that if a school had a poor performance, discussions were held about their options for the future. If they academised promptly, this gave them the opportunity to select the academy chain they wished to join. On the other hand, if an Ofsted inspection led to a category 4 grade, the school was obliged to academies and would not have the opportunity to select which academy chain to join. If a school was judged to be “good”, on the other hand, it was free to join an academy chain without sponsorship.

Officers explained that the mutual established to provide educational support services aimed to serve all schools in the borough.

Members expressed their appreciation of the written comments provided by the representative of the Oasis chain on the challenges faced in their interactions with parents, and the statements made by the representative of the Synaptic Trust on the importance of staff development and support. They then asked how the academy chains provided their teachers with opportunities for further development.

Members were informed that the Step Academy Trust provided opportunities for skills and career development through the chain’s own NTQ programme as well as senior management openings within the chain. The Trust also offered teachers opportunities to transfer between their schools to widen their teaching experience. Members were advised that the Reach2 Academy Trust offered teachers a leadership development programme and provided coaching and mentoring to any teachers who experienced difficulties in their work.

Members heard that the Oasis Academy Trust considered the “healthy communities” concept to be very important and acknowledged the relationship between teacher well-being and pupil well-being. The Trust valued a coaching culture and the importance of offering work-life support. To this end, they ran staff wellbeing surveys to gain a good understanding of staff issues and feelings. As regards staff development, much of this took place through visits to other schools offering good practice in a particular area of teaching. In addition, the Oasis Academy Trust used professional learning communities in South-East London e.g. an online network developing good practice in geography.

Members asked how council officers fulfilled their statutory duty to monitor the quality of performance of Croydon schools. Officers explained that they did this through school improvement advisers. Council officers had access to relevant data from all schools in the borough but were not able to carry out visits to all establishments. Representatives of academy chains confirmed that the link advisor working with them fulfilled a very useful role and contributed towards a good working relationship with the local authority. Academy chain representatives acknowledged that this relationship had undergone difficulties at first, but was improving significantly.

The representative of the Oasis Academy Trust stated that it worked across twenty local authorities and that not all had the capacity to challenge the work and standards of its academies. He added that the

Trust had a better developed relationship with Croydon than with many of the other local authorities. The Trust was able to operate without such partnership work, but acknowledged that it was far more productive to work in partnership with the local authority.

Members questioned where accountability started and ended, and where the boundaries lay. Academy Trust representatives stated that they were moving towards being completely self-sufficient on teacher training, scrutiny of standards, etc.

The representative of the Oasis Academy Trust stated that the only concern the Trust had related to primary school admissions. The arrival of new pupils in “drips and drabs” throughout the year caused the principals of affected schools, such as Shirley Park Oasis Academy, great frustration. In addition, the Trust was experiencing funding levels which were lower than in other London boroughs. In contrast, inner London boroughs, which had similar characteristics to some Croydon schools, received far more generous funding from the EFA.

Members discussed the effectiveness of publicity for newly established schools and expressed concerns regarding the fact that many available places were not being filled. Representatives of Academy Trusts stated that they had heavily publicised open days at new establishments such as Heathfield School (by Spice’s Yard) but had had a very poor response. The representative of Oasis Academy Trust added that one of their open day events had attracted only seven attendees and another had attracted no parents at all. They shared their doubts as to whether all places would be filled, as they had found predictions for demand in another school in London to be so inaccurate that the opening had had to be deferred by two years. One Croydon school had been about sixty pupils short in its first year although the situation was now improving.

It was observed that academy funding had previously been based on estimates, leading to underperforming and underused schools having a great deal of money. Funding was now changing to a formula which was based more heavily on the census, leading to financial pressures and a risk of redundancies, restructuring, etc.

Officers added that detailed work was carried out to obtain accurate predictions of need for school places, using data from a variety of sources including statistics from the Local Government Association. Members heard that the birth rate in the north of the borough had gone up by 76% in the last three years. In addition, inward migration, which was very difficult to estimate, had increased considerably over the last ten years, with large numbers moving from inner London to this borough. Another factor which was very difficult to estimate was the preference of parents for one school or another. Council officers explained that all the above made it very challenging to provide newly arrived children a school place within two miles of their address within 20 days of their application.

Members asked how the academies went about sharing good practice with each other and with non-academy schools. Academy trust representatives commented that historically, good schools tended to be

members of a good partnership and bad schools tended to be isolated. The representative of the Step Academy chain stated that it did work with non-academy schools although there were concerns about the sustainability of such partnership work. In addition, such co-operation could progress only as far as the leadership of the non-academy school would allow. However, wherever possible, the academy chain would act on any signs of emerging problems and endeavour to take action to tackle them early.

Members asked whether certain parts of the borough were “monopolised” by certain academy chains and what control the local authority had over such trends. Officers explained that they endeavoured to encourage variety across the borough but did not always have control over the choice of academy trust for a given school. If the Department for Education got involved in the selection of sponsor for a “category 4” school, this could unwittingly lead to a monopoly in a particular area of the borough through the choice of a well-known and well regarded academy trust over and above a less well-known one.

Officers were asked whether parents should have the power to decide whether a school should become an academy or not. They explained that consultation with parents does take place when a school is considering academisation, but the Department for Education does not have to act on the results of the consultation. For example, it did not follow parental and staff preferences in its choice of sponsor for Roke School.

Members questioned Academy Trust representatives regarding their relationships with parents, quoting one case where parents whose first language was not English had had very unsatisfactory communications with their child’s academy school, and whose problems had finally been resolved in a sympathetic manner by the child’s year teacher. Members were advised that in general terms, the quality of communication with parents depended on the quality of leadership at each establishment. The representative of the Step Academy Trust explained that every effort was made to educate parents about the structure of the Trust include a twice yearly information drive on its work.

Academy Trust representatives were asked what steps were taken to reach out to parents who did not engage with their schools. They replied that measures ranged from having the head teacher engaging with them informally at the school gate, to home visits, which could have an extremely powerful effect, to using specialist services if the parent(s) still failed to communicate with the school. They also stressed that parents needed to be made aware of what was expected of them, the pupils and the school, e.g. with respect to taking pupils out of school for holidays in term time. In addition, trusts sought to develop a holistic relationship with parents through family centres.

Members sought to establish how effectively the local authority monitored academies. Council officers explained that they were well informed on the output of each academy and what Ofsted thought of them, but did not necessarily have the chance to meet with the schools and obtain more qualitative data on their work. Members asked what

measures could be taken to tackle problems at local academies. Council officers explained that, since September 2014, regional school commissioners had been appointed to deal with any concerns raised by local authorities. These commissioners had the powers to carry out statutory interventions such as finding new sponsors, closing schools, etc. Members were advised that the council had not had responsibility for complain resolution for the last three years. Parents were advised to refer complaints to the following parties, escalating them if necessary in the order set out below:

- 1- the head teacher
- 2- the local board of governors or chair of the academy trust
- 3- the Education Funding Agency for academies or the Department for Education for maintained schools

Members were advised that the local authority still got involved in guiding parents through the complaints process and was often consulted by the Education Funding Agency or the Department for Education when a complaint had been lodged with them.

Council officers added that *local authorities* were now subject to inspection under the “framework for inspection of Local Authority arrangements for school improvement”. This includes scrutiny of local authority engagement with academies. Officers added that local authorities themselves had no inspection duties but had to report any concerns to the appropriate authorities. In this respect, Croydon was unusual as it had the resources to do more than desk-top research on the performance of its academies.

Members questioned council officers on free schools in the borough. They expressed concerns regarding the failure of some free schools to engage with the council and the community and what members felt was a lack of suitable facilities. Members also heard that the council had expressed their concerns regarding the brochure and narrow curriculum of another prospective free school. Concerns were also expressed regarding the capacity of governors and it was suggested that candidates for governor posts should undergo a test to ascertain whether they are fit and proper persons” to undertake these responsibilities.

Members questioned council officers and academy chain representatives at length regarding their work on safeguarding. They reminded all present that while the local authority no longer had any direct responsibility regarding school standards, they retained responsibility for ensuring that schools carried out their safeguarding responsibilities effectively. In addition, all present were reminded that responsibility and accountability for children’s safeguarding were the same for maintained schools and academies under legislation introduced in 2002.

Members highlighted the fact that the role of scrutiny included holding the relevant Cabinet Member to account for the effectiveness of children’s safeguarding in the borough. In addition, they reiterated the need to hear the voice of children at risk and expressed their concerns about the fact that current communication channels did not provide easy access to this.

Representatives of academy trusts stated that their safeguarding procedures were essentially the same as with maintained schools, and involved multi-agency teams, social services and safeguarding audits. They highlighted the need for robust systems to ensure that emerging problems could be identified and tackled swiftly.

Council officers stated that they had very good engagement from all schools in the borough on safeguarding, with a designated safeguarding lead in every school and a multi-agency safeguarding forum providing supervision to safeguarding leads. Council officers added that they also got good engagement on safeguarding from all independent schools in the borough.

A member highlighted a safeguarding case where no teacher had been present at multi-agency safeguarding conferences and asked whether teachers were released from lessons to attend such meetings. Council officers pointed to great variability across schools in the borough for a range of different reasons including lack of teaching cover, the short notice at which some conferences were called or summer holidays. However, efforts have been made to involve teachers better through the designated safeguarding lead forums.

Members heard that the incidence of mental health issues, substance misuse, etc., was likely to be higher in schools which were performing poorly. Representatives of academy trusts expressed the need for improvements in access to early intervention on these issues outside the school environment. They also observed that some of the children being taught in Croydon's schools did not appear to have leave to stay in this country.

Members asked how council officers could be sure that academies and academy trusts which do not engage with the local authority safeguard their children adequately. Council officers replied that such schools still return safeguarding audits to the local authority and are included in the 10% random audit conducted by the council. In addition, they explained that big academy chains conducted their own safeguarding audits. Asked about the level of pastoral care available to children and young people at risk, academy trusts representatives stated that they offered a range of activities to provide additional support to them. In addition, the representative of the Oasis Academy Trust stated that this chain had developed an extensive volunteering programme, which constituted a very useful extra resource for providing support to children at risk.

A parent governor co-optee of the sub-committee informed members that he had attended training on children's safeguarding organised by the Harris Academy trust, which had been of a high quality.

At the end of this agenda item, warm thanks were reiterated to representatives of academy chains and council officers for their attendance at the meeting and their full and frank answers to members' questions.

Conclusions expressed by members on this agenda item were as follows:

- Members were reassured about the willingness of some academy chains to engage with the council and partners, unlike free schools. The Chains were commended for their openness and willingness to be accountable
- Members expressed some concerns that the demand for the services of the council's mutual might decrease as academies became more self-sufficient
- Members expressed concerns the dominance of a few academy chains in some parts of the borough
- Members questioned the choice of location for some new schools, which did not always appear to match the location where demand was at its highest
- Members expressed concerns about the lack of lead-in time and publicity for opening new schools, some of which have significant numbers of empty places

A26/14 CHILDREN'S SAFEGUARDING (agenda item 7)

Members agreed to postpone this item to the next meeting of the sub-committee.

They agreed to support a recommendation suggested by a parent-governor co-optee that a short survey be run with voluntary sector organisations to capture any safeguarding concerns or issues and tackle them promptly.

Support was also shown for the appointment of a safeguarding lead member in this committee.

A query was raised about a police protocol regarding children's safeguarding, which had been taken to the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board for approval. It was agreed that enquiries would be made as to whether this protocol was being implemented.

RESOLVED: that a report on Children's Safeguarding be presented at the 3 February 2015 meeting of this sub-committee and that recommendations arising from discussions at the 14 October meeting be agreed at the February meeting.

A27/14 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME (agenda item 8)

Members confirmed the work programme for the 3 February meeting.

RESOLVED: As stated in item A26/14, that the agenda item on children's safeguarding would be discussed in full at the 3 February meeting of the sub-committee

PART B

None

The meeting ended at 9.10pm