

MEETING OF THE

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 13 October 2015 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, Andrew Pelling ,

Co-optees:
James Collins and Vinoo John

Also in attendance:

- Councillor Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Learning
- Councillor Shafi Khan, Deputy Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Learning

A45/15 Welcome and Apologies for absence

Apologies were received by Councillors Jamie Audsley, Dave Harvey and Elaine Jones.

A46/15 Minutes of the meeting held on 22 September 2015 (agenda item 2)

RESOLVED THAT: the minutes of the meeting held on 22 September 2015 be signed as a correct record.

A47/15 Disclosures of interest (agenda item 3)

There were none.

A48/15 Urgent business (agenda item 4)

There was none.

A49/15 Exempt items (agenda item 5)

Members agreed to bring item B1 of the agenda into Part A, there being no exempt data contained within the Part B minutes. These minutes were duly agreed.

The following officers were in attendance for this item:

- Paul Greenhalgh, Executive Director (People)
- Ian Lewis, Director, Children and Family Early Intervention and Children's Social Care
- Catherine Doran, Chair of the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board

The Chair of the CSCB introduced this agenda item, acknowledging the political support for the work of the Board in holding relevant agencies to account. She recognised the significant challenges being faced by the partnership but also paid tribute to the work and efforts of talented staff to improve services to safeguard children and young people in the borough and to build their aspirations. However, the Chair admitted that there was still a lot of unmet need in the borough.

Members were reminded that the chair of the CSCB reported directly to the Chief Executive of the Council, and that the senior management team had had to work very hard to build robust systems, a strong governance framework, and improve leadership in children's safeguarding. To add to these challenges, the remit of the Board had increased dramatically over the last year to embrace the "Prevent" agenda.

The CSCB Chair reported that the work of the Board has been conducted through over ten sub-groups with clear terms of reference, seven serious case reviews have been conducted, creating a significant volume of work, and lessons have been learnt from these which have led to improved procedures. Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation has been a priority in the past year and the Chair said that relevant officers were to be congratulated for their work in this area. This had included securing significant funding to improve services and creating good tracking systems.

It had previously been noted that youth engagement in safeguarding issues had been limited. The Chair was able to report that this was improving and that it was making a positive difference. She added that councillors had engaged with the child safeguarding agenda far better than before, and was appreciative of this added support and for councillors' take-up of training on this subject.

The CSCB chair reported that Croydon had the highest number of missing children in London and possibly in the country. This presented a real challenge to officers but real progress was being made to reduce the number of children and young people absconding.

The CSCB Chair highlighted the greatest challenges to the Board:

- Recording action being taken
- Strengthening partnership work
- Holding all relevant parties, groups and services to account
- Community engagement with child safeguarding issues

Officers were questioned regarding the Board's sub-groups. They explained that the Chairs of the sub-groups sat on the CSCB executive group to ensure that communications were effective and that the board functioned well.

The Chair asserted that there was a need for more early help assessments to nip problems in the bud. The sub-groups have a role to play in finding out why some schools conduct very few such assessments, and in identifying solutions. She observed that too many social care referrals were not being addressed swiftly enough through the use of early help assessments.

One of the sub-committee's co-optees, who sits on the education sub-group, echoed this statement and stated that there was not enough representation from private schools at present. Members were advised that the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) was tackling this issue and forging links with private schools in the borough.

Members were advised that very good progress had been made with safeguarding very young children (aged 0-5 years) and with the Troubled Families programme. The Board's coordinating and challenging role included the expectation that schools would use the Pupil Premium effectively to provide support where it was needed.

The Chair highlighted the need to set up systems for recording the work being carried out by agencies. As insufficient recording is taking place at the moment, the Board was losing some of the evidence of good interventions.

Officers were asked whether evidencing the impact of their services was a "systems problem". The CSCB Chair stated that very good councils had set up very simple systems to achieve this, which Croydon did not have. The Chair was asked whether there was some kind of cross-borough tracker system on missing children and explained that the government had decided against a national register because of civil liberties issues. Members went on to ask whether the Board had a "dashboard" of statistics to keep track of their data and were told that yes, they did have one, and were working with the London Borough of Wandsworth to improve it. The Chair stated that she would be happy to share it with the sub-committee in six months' time.

Asked whether the CSCB shared the annual report with the governing bodies of the Board's partner agencies, the Chair confirmed that the agencies on the board were directed to do so and that the report also went to the Local Strategic Partnership.

Officers were asked whether the balance of resources was correctly allocated across age ranges. They replied that it was important to give all children a good early start, hence the investment in the "Best Start" programme. However, they acknowledged the fact that children presented problems at different phases of their lives. For instance, transitions - particularly from primary to secondary school - could be troubled for many children and teenage years presented their own challenges. In addition, it was important to offer early intervention for families in crisis to avoid spiralling escalations and emergencies, with the trauma that these left in their wake.

Members questioned officers regarding the demand for housing in the borough and the impact of the withdrawal of tax credits. They stated that Croydon had had the highest level of incoming movement across London, a fact which had been reinforced by data published in late September this year. Croydon had to meet the challenges of having the highest population of all the London boroughs, the highest youth population, the highest deprivation and the highest number of

looked after children, including 530 looked after children from other boroughs. Members were advised that a needs analysis was being conducted by housing officers to identify local needs and their role in addressing them, alongside a major training programme to implement this work effectively. Officers undertook to provide information on the impact of the withdrawal of tax credits after this sub-committee meeting.

In addition, members heard that Croydon's "Gateway" team was carrying out a lot of prevention work. For instance, support was being given to families at risk of eviction to prevent this from happening, with all the disruption to the families' lives that such an event would entail, including the risk of having to take children into care.

Officers stated that Croydon had lower housing costs than other London boroughs. A large number of foster carers were employed in the borough and a number of semi-independent providers for 16-17 year olds were also based in this borough. In all, the borough is a thriving market for placement of Looked After Children. However, it was noted that providers were independent of council visits and were not visited by Ofsted. Officers were taking steps to share information about these providers among relevant partners.

Officers highlighted the challenges presented by large numbers of looked after children living in this borough:

- more children tend to run away
- there is a higher risk of child sexual exploitation
- the numbers of vulnerable children present a challenge to local schools and local services
- Croydon Council has a higher level of responsibility and must also ensure that the boroughs which have placed their children here take their responsibilities seriously.

Members questioned officers regarding the cost of providing services to looked after children. They were advised that other boroughs paid for placements but other costs such as health, education, Youth Offending Service supervision, etc. could not be recharged to the councils of origin. One cost that these boroughs could be recharged for was work carried out on "return home interviews".

Members noted the high numbers of teenage pregnancies, youth offending, etc. in the borough. They asked whether these numbers were due to the high youth population or could not be explained away through this statistic alone. Officers explained that statistical baselines had been set in 1998 and that Croydon's figures had presented real cause for concern at that time. However, the situation had improved since then and the position in the borough was within the London average. As regards youth offending, numbers are the highest in London because of Croydon's high youth population, but proportionately much lower.

As regards domestic violence, members were advised that MOPAC monitored their incidence and that the council had worked with this body to tackle this offence. Officers stressed that high levels of reporting were a positive development as it suggested that victims were confident that action would be taken to protect them and to prosecute the offender.

Members discussed support for people who had recently arrived in the borough. The CSCB Chair stated that this was a challenge in terms of women's services. In particular, discussions were being held to ensure that women had access to pre-birth services. As regards asylum seekers, members were advised that a

dedicated officer was in post to address their needs.

Officers were questioned on their handling of Female Genital Mutilation. They stated that, while local health agencies had run awareness-raising sessions on FGM, very few referrals to social care on this offence were recorded - which did not mean that it was not taking place. Members heard that some countries conducted statutory full physical examinations of children at a set age, but that less data was available in the UK where such intrusive examinations were not carried out.

Members questioned officers regarding transient populations in the borough. They were advised that borough managed were working together to improve communications and were very aware that work needed to take place across borough boundaries to tackle such issues as child sexual exploitation. Members asked who would take responsibility for cases involving more than one borough and were told that there were protocols for transferring child protection data, although such cases could trigger disagreements between boroughs. The Chair stated that pan-London procedures were worth revisiting as they often affected the most vulnerable families in the community and that London Councils needed to have a role in addressing the challenges presented by such cases.

One area which required improvement was work with local communities, on which services had not had any capacity to make much progress. However, it was observed that contacts with mothers through maternity services was a good way of making contact with local communities.

Members remarked that a key determinant of good long-term health was educational achievement. Officers stated that early intervention needed to make the best possible use of the Pupil Premium to nip problems in the bud and to maximise each child's chances of educational success. In addition, some schools with low numbers of early interventions were being asked whether they were failing to carry out such intervention or to keep records of such interventions.

Members were advised that the Board took the following steps in order to keep track of the performance of the various agencies involved in child safeguarding:

- They received section 11 audits from the agencies involved in child safeguarding, which enabled them to form a picture of safeguarding matters in the borough
- They received reports on multi-agency audits (12 audits had been carried out on various themes)
- They use their own reporting systems as well as other existing data collection systems

Members discussed the resources available for children's safeguarding. They were advised that the funding formula no longer took "need" into account. As a result, outer London boroughs, and Croydon in particular, have seen deprivation rise as low income, vulnerable families have arrived from inner London boroughs with high housing costs which were no longer covered by housing benefit, while funding for children's services has gone down. This has had a knock on effect on social services case loads, which are currently very high and present a challenge for staff retention. Maintaining continuity, calibre and stability of the workforce was an ongoing challenge.

Members asked what Croydon needed to do to be awarded a "good" after the next Ofsted inspection. They were advised that the biggest impact would come from ensuring consistency of good service, which includes better attendance at case

conferences, better trouble-shooting, and better data analysis to identify good practice and challenges. Officers stressed that the OFSTED benchmark was very high, and that its remit had widened, which presented a significant challenge for Croydon in this difficult climate.

Members asked what measures could be taken to ensure that no children fell through the safety net. Officers replied that one could never ensure 100% prevention, although this could be kept to a minimum through early identification and effective action. They stated that all the relevant agencies were working well to keep risk to a minimum although they acknowledged that police attendance at case conferences had been below the 50% target some months ago- thankfully, the situation was now improving.

Officers were questioned about the lessons learnt from the previous year's serious case reviews. They were advised that the key lessons included the need to share information among partners more effectively, the need to follow the procedures in place and to strive for continuity of staffing

At the previous year's meeting on children's safeguarding, members had expressed concerns regarding the fact that the annual report had been presented to Cabinet "for noting". Councillors asked the Cabinet member how the recommendation to Cabinet introducing the annual CSCB report could be made more proactive. She replied that work on safeguarding was a continuous process for officers even if the report itself was "for noting".

In conclusion, members agreed that:

- Child safeguarding risks were rising as a result of challenges presented by the rising population of the borough and the reduced funding available to deliver services
- Improvements were required in:
 - communications with London Councils and communities and across boroughs
 - improved tracking of looked after children from other boroughs
 - finding effective ways of retaining staff to ensure a consistent quality of service
 - links between primary schools and the CSCB
- An additional topic on the workforce and ways of retaining staff in the long term be added to the Scrutiny work programme for 2016-2017.

The Cabinet members and officers were thanked for attending the meeting.

A51/15 Scrutiny work programme (agenda item 7)

Members confirmed the work programme for the rest of the year. They also agreed to add an additional topic to the list for the 2016-17 Scrutiny work programme:

'the workforce and approaches to retaining council staff in the long term'

The meeting ended at 9.07pm