

Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee

Meeting of held on Tuesday, 19 January 2021 at 6.30 pm. This meeting was held remotely via Microsoft Teams.

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Robert Ward (Chair);
Councillor Sean Fitzsimons (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Jamie Audsley Sue Bennett, Jerry Fitzpatrick, Helen Pollard and Louisa Woodley

Co-optee Members

Josephine Copeland (Non-voting Teacher representative), Mr Leo Morrell (Voting Diocesan Representative), Ms Elaine Jones (Voting Diocesan Representative (Catholic Diocese)) and Paul O'Donnell (Voting Parent Governor Representative)

Also Present: Councillor Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Learning
Councillor Shafi Khan, Deputy Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Learning
Debbie Jones, Interim Director Children Families and Education
Nick Pendry, Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care
Kerry Crichlow, Programme Director Children's Improvement
Kate Bingham, Interim Head of Finance Children's Families and Education
Shelley Davies, Interim Director of Education
Nicholas Dry, St Nicholas School
Clare Bracher, CastleHill Primary Academy
Serena Hemmings, CastleHill Primary Academy
Lorraine Slee, Redgates School
Ann Pratt, Park Hill School
Toby Martlew, Ark Oval School
Zoe Harris, Elmwood School
Jennifer Adamson, Saffron Valley Collegiate

Apologies: Councillor Bernadette Khan

PART A

1/21 Apologies for absence

Apologies received from Councillor Bernadette Khan

2/21 Minutes of the previous sub-committee meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 November 2020 were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting subject to the following amendment:

That the attendance record reflect Councillor Shafi Khan as being present at the meeting.

3/21 Disclosures of interest

There was none.

4/21 Urgent Business (if any)

There were no urgent items of business.

The Chair took the opportunity to inform Members that the decision for closure of Virgo Fidelis Covent School had been taken at 18 January 2020 Cabinet. It was intended that the decision would be called in by the Scrutiny and Overview Committee. The Members of Children and Young People Scrutiny Sub-Committee would be invited to the meeting and a provisional date to discuss matters was set for 3 February 2021.

Additionally a meeting would need to be convened to discuss the reconfiguration of the Councils finances

5/21 Action list update

The Letter sent by the Chair to Early Help and Children's Social Care commending them for their work over the last few years was well received.

6/21 Staff Changes, Service Impact and response to Budget Reductions in Early Help and Children's Social Care

The Interim Executive Director of Children Families and Education introduced the report which detailed the proposals and the projected savings implications of the proposals.

A Member asked what the principles were that lay behind the determination for reassessment of services. Officers said that in response to the report in the public interest, the financial pressure the Council was under which was not dissimilar to other local authorities, they had looked at where the service was in context of Croydon as well as against other LA's. The department had high spending in general and also as a result of the interventions that were put in place following the inadequate Ofsted rating in 2017. Spending was increased in order to drive improvement and standards which resulted in an outstanding Ofsted rating in 2020. In order to meet the requirements of a reduced budget, proposals had been put forward which has undergone rigorous risk assessments.

Members further challenged that the report stated that there was a requirement to reduce Council spending to a statutory minimum and sought clarification on what this meant for services. Officers assured the Sub-Committee that the proposals do not take services down to a statutory minimum and that they had been diligent in decision making on the details put forward. The proposals do however detail what steps would have to be taken if the Council received a minimum statutory offer.

The Cabinet Member for Children Families and Learning added that the proposals were put together ensuring that services were not only being delivered for young people but that a good service was maintained and their voices continued to be central to the work done. All measures were being taken to prepare for any eventuality.

It was asked what was being done to make certain that areas where children could fall through the gap would be spotted early through the process of changes that were occurring. Officers said that they were working diligently to identify the impact of risk in reduction of spend in all services by exploring the balance between investment, savings and what was being proposed.

In response to a Member question on what was being done to ensure that core skills were being retained as part of the reconfiguration process. Officers said that they were working diligently on maintaining development and growth in spite of reconfiguration of services.

Members' expressed concerns on what the alternative plan would be in the event that the MHCLG did not approve the Capitalisation directive as this was a risk that had to be prepared for. Reassurance was sought that there was an alternative plan in consideration should the Council have to prepare for more extensive cuts. The Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Learning said that there were no specific areas that had been divided into different plans based on the outcome of the Capitalisation Directive but extensive discussions had been and were taking place in case of all eventualities. The priority was to ensure that the services delivered to children were safe and of good quality regardless of the outcome from MHCLG. The Council was working closely with community organisations, schools and also listening to voices of young children to ensure that if services changed, their needs would continue to be met.

It was asked what advanced provision was being made in terms of the implications of budget reductions for Early Years and Family Support and the consequences this would have on schools and their resources. Officers acknowledged that difficult decisions had to be made in putting forward suggested savings and one of those savings was across the Children's Centre's budget which was not a statutory service, funding for which comes from the General Fund. The department was working closely with the centres to look at the current provision, and what could be delivered amidst cuts being made. Schools were being consulted as part of the proposals as the impact

would affect them most. It was important that the Council worked with the voluntary sector to explore how best they could provide additional support as it was essential to be clear about the services offered by organisations external to the Council.

Members were clear that it was important that the Council not only recognised the vital role that the Voluntary Sector played in the community but understood the challenges and pressures face. Pressures which had been compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and be clear on the level of support they could offer due to their own limited resources.

The Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Learning added that it was important to highlight that discussions in relation to the reconfiguration of children's centres had been ongoing prior to the serving of S114 notice and the Council's financial challenge. Work was being done closely with all parties to ensure that needs were being met in different sections of the Borough. There was a commitment to ensure that the Best Start service for 0-5 year olds remained an area of priority and ensuring that the Boroughs Early Years provision remained an area of focus.

In reaching its recommendations, The Sub-Committee came to the following **Conclusions:**

1. The intention to maintain services above the statutory minimum in spite of the need to significantly reduce costs across the Council, was welcomed.
2. The plan to retain expertise to enable expansion of the services offered as funds allow was welcomed, as was retaining a culture of continuous improvement.
3. Clarity was needed on the future role of the voluntary sector which has provided immense support to families during this time and was experiencing unprecedented challenges. If the intention is that the voluntary sector should replace some of the services cut due to the need to save costs, we need to be reassured that they are in a position to do so.
4. In future reports, officers to ensure that there was detailed information on the UASC financial gap, how this was being managed and what the alternative plans in place were to support this group.

The Sub-Committee **Recommended** that:

1. Reduction in Early Help will impact schools. The Council needs to be clear on the level of support to be provided to school and consider how to ensure effective timely communication to schools about what support is available and how to access it in order to make suitable alternative arrangements.
2. There was a risk that the Council may not secure MHCLG approval for a capitalisation directive. Consideration be given by the Executive Leadership Team as to how this risk will be managed.

Early Help, Children's Social Care and Education Dashboards

The Director for Early Help and Children's Social Care introduced the dashboard which detailed activities of the service and it was noted that:

- The slight fluctuation in the completion of assessments within 45 days was being investigated as well as the number of cases being closed to Early Help due to family disengaging with support.
- The rise in numbers in Children in Need

Members took the opportunity to ask questions

The Chair commented that it was heartening given the level of disruption that had occurred in the last year that there remained stability in the service and that the leadership team had line of sight of issues that had been flagged on the dashboard. Officers said that this was a testament to the dedication and commitment of the social work staff and the journey that the department had undergone in terms of performance in the last year.

A question was raised on social workers caseloads and if the current figures of 16 maximum was acceptable. Officers said that the department worked on a basis of 16 cases across statutory services in order for social workers to manage caseloads safely and deliver on service need. This was in comparison to other local authorities who has caseloads of approximately 19/20, it was important to keep caseloads at as low as level as possible due to complexities presented.

A Member suggested that going forward, the dashboard be presented on screen for the benefit of people watching at home. This suggestion was endorsed by all Members.

The Interim Director of Education introduced the dashboard which detailed activities of the service and it was noted that:

- There was a rise of children with Education Health and Care Plans.
- There was a rise in Elective Home Education and this was an area of focus for the Education Directorate.

A Member asked for better understating of the rise in Elective Home Education and questioned whether it may not necessarily be temporary or as a direct result of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Further information such as statistical information and comparison with other LA's was sought and how this would impact financially and in terms of resources in an area where statutory role was limited. Officers said that there had been a rise in Elective Home education prior to the pandemic and in the last 10 months there had been substantial increase. The dashboard presented with contained an oversight of figures and a briefing that had been shared with the Children's Safeguarding Board on this matter could be shared with the Sub-Committee. The main reason behind the rise in numbers in the last 10 months was due to the pandemic and anxiety around rising number of Covid cases. In order to maintain oversight on the situation, a member of staff had been redeployed

into post to track whether there were changes in figures when the country was fully out of lockdown and Covid measures and were relaxed.
The Chair thanked officers for the report.

Request for Information

- Briefing on Elective Home Education, including data and benchmarked figures

The Sub-Committee came to the following **Conclusions**:

1. The Dashboard to be displayed on screen in future meetings as this would be beneficial to members of the public viewing the live stream as well as councillors in the meeting.
2. The Sub-Committee members to start thinking about areas of the dashboard that could be used to develop the work programme for the upcoming municipal year

8/21 Higher Education Journey of Young Croydon Residents

The Head of Service, Education Commissioning & Post-16 Participation introduced and went through the highlights of the report.

Following this, the Sub-Committee had the opportunity to ask questions.

The Chair commended the level of detailed information on the data set and acknowledged that this had been collated as confirmed by officers over a number of years. The information included in the report was a tremendous resource for all as it contained information for the whole of London. It was beneficial to have comparative data of the journey of young people into further education and jobs.

It was asked if there was any concerns in light of the current situation regarding institutions that Croydon's young people progressed onto. The officer responded that there were no particular concerns and that the level of impact of the current situation was yet to materialise. Institutions have had to adapt their offer in terms of virtual learning and university students had experienced a very disruptive year to their learning that they were still adjusting to. It was expected that there would be significant emerging impact going forward on the choices that are made on whether they continued into higher education in the future.

Questions were raised on the inequalities highlighted in the report between Russell Group and other Universities and what could be done to bridge parity between the two types of universities. In particular to support those from ethnic backgrounds and heritage which only a small percentage go on to attend Russell Group universities. The officer said that all universities now had in place funding for wider participation which was being used to target specific groups that had been underrepresented or had not been able to attend particular types of universities. In terms of Croydon as a Borough,

universities worked directly with schools in the borough, and in January Cambridge University commenced a programme about raising aspirations in young people at an earlier stage in their education. Unfortunately this programme was put on hold due to the pandemic and it was hoped to continue at a later date. The Council was committed to ongoing direct work with universities to raise the aspiration of young people particularly those from disadvantaged groups.

It was commented that when looking at the data across London, it was true that Black Caribbean children were least likely to go onto Russell Group universities but the data also showed that Black African children were more likely to go onto further education and to attend Russell Group universities. Additionally there were children from Chinese, Asian and Indian backgrounds that perform extremely well in terms of higher education. It was important to hone in on the data to explore the Croydon Context alongside the Borough's local offer.

The Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Learning added that it was key that as corporate parents, the focus should be about how young people in the Borough were supported regardless of their ethnicity. Provision of crucial support was needed on how to access top universities by focusing on their applications and preparation for interview. It would be interesting to review the emerging data post Covid due to challenges presented with learning and what this will mean in terms of educational progress and outcomes.

The Chair thanked officers for the report and reflected that going forward consideration may be given to further scrutiny on student choice on higher education and life outcomes and how this would have been impacted by the Covid-19 Pandemic.

The Sub-Committee came to the following **Conclusion**:

1. This item was a valuable source of information on the achievements of Croydon's young people, the educational choices they are making and their success in the jobs market. A possible subject for scrutiny is the availability of suitable jobs in Croydon for which we might engage with local employers.

9/21 Education Budget

The Interim Head of Finance, Children Families and Education introduced the report and the following was noted:

- There was an overall national schools funding increase of £4.8 billion for 2021/22 and £7.1 billion for 2022/23
- Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, there was a £1bn 'catch-up' package to tackle the impact of disruption of the Pandemic.

- The Croydon Dedicated Schools Grant Allocation for 021/22 was £390 million which was an increase of £6million in each Block.
- The High Needs block welcomed the additional £6 million due to it's overspend.
- The recovery of High Needs overspend which was currently £18 million remained an area of priority and work was underway with the DfE on addressing the deficit.
- The deficit of the two closed schools in the borough would fall to the General Fund.

Following the overview of the report provided, Members had the opportunity to raise questions.

A Member questioned what was being done to manage excess places in schools which presented a problem in accumulation of large financial deficits. Officers said that managing plans for school places was a challenge due to various contributing factors such as inward migration and birth rates. There were issues in the Borough with surplus places in some schools due to popularity and parental choice. Balancing budgets for schools was challenging as this was done on the basis of children on school roll and leavers. The department was keeping a clear oversight on schools that had a deficit by providing challenge where necessary, requesting info on their budget and more importantly providing support and assisting to explore where possible savings could be made.

The Cabinet Member for Children Families and Learning added that it was important that the focus should be on local schools for local children and that efforts continued to be made to build and influence parental choice in order for this vision to be realised.

It was asked how confident officers were on controlling the budget and closing the deficit as there was significant concern about the Council's ability to manage the deficit. Officers responded that all that could be done was being done without compromising the offer for children, in particular within the legislative requirements of Special Educational Needs (SEN) to contain spend within the allocation. It was difficult to be confident on paying back and eliminating the accumulated deficit to bring back the budget in year. The department was working hard to manage its budget and this was reflected in the SEND Strategy's basis of local provision for Croydon children as this would assist in not having to pay high costs for out of borough independent school fees. There was confidence in the SEND Strategy's proposal outcomes that this could be achieved.

The Chair thanked officers for their report and engagement with the meeting and also for the briefing sessions that had been provided prior to the meeting to assist with in depth knowledge and better understating of the Budget.

Request for information

1. Pictorial excess school places map to be provided to the sub-committee

The Sub-Committee came to the following **Conclusion:**

1. The Sub-Committee was not reassured in the Councils ability to close the gap on the accumulated deficit on the high needs block

10/21 Education Standards

The Interim Director of Education introduced the report and the following was noted:

- Performance data for KS4 and KS5 were not included as national examinations did not take place due to Covid-19 Pandemic.
- The focus of the report was more on changing education for children.
- Meeting were being held by the Local Authority to discuss any support needs in the bid to strengthen partnerships. To date, 115 schools have attended the meetings and this highlights the importance of the strength of the relationships in place.

Following the overview of the report given, Members took the opportunity to direct questions at officers.

A Member stressed the importance for the Regional Schools Commissioner to be invited to a future meeting to provide reassurance on the alignment of their roles and the Council. Officers said that throughout the pandemic they had met with their link every week in order to collaborate, gain insight and support as needed and would welcome the opportunity to extend a meeting invite as required by the Sub-Committee.

In response to Members' questions on what was being done to maintain levels of teacher recruitment, in particular during this period due to the challenges presented by the pandemic, officers said recruitment was still ongoing despite challenges.

It was further asked what was being done to retain high standards of quality teachers and maintain quality of delivery which was even more needed during this time to ensure positive outcomes for children. Officers acknowledged that it was vital to focus on what was being done now to deliver good quality education to children despite current events. Quality was important with recognition of positives and also consideration given to areas of increased focus. Ofsted had made a decision not to inspect during lockdown but were making visits to schools and raising challenge where appropriate whilst recognising all the work that had gone into changes to ways of working.

A Member commented that it would be valuable to be provided with information that teased out things for further consideration that had not gone as well as planned as well as strategies that had not been well received or worked well. Officers agreed to provide this following the meeting.

There was concern raised regarding the level of vacancies of senior posts, officers advised that there was currently a review taking place of this with proposals in consideration.

The Chair thanked officers for their engagement

Request for information

- A link on Teaching Schools to be circulated
- A briefing to be provided on lessons learnt and areas for improvement
- A short briefing on teacher recruitment and retention.

The Sub-Committee came to the following **Conclusions:**

1. It was important that future reports present a balanced view by providing information on areas for improvement, things that could have been done better or strategies that did not receive high take up by schools.
2. The Regional Schools Commissioner to be invited to future meetings and for the interim Director of Education to facilitate a meeting between the Commissioner and the Chair of the Sub-Committee in the first instance.
3. The Sub-Committee to keep abreast of details of recruitment to key posts such as that of Heads of Departments that were now vacant or had been deleted.

11/21 Blended Learning Assessment

The Interim Director of Education presented the item by introducing the Head Teacher's from various schools in the Borough that had been invited to give their perspectives on blended learning and what had worked or hadn't worked for their individual schools.

Discussions took place on what opportunities could be carried forward from the virtual way of delivering education. Guests in attendance from schools for Special Educational Needs children stated that there had been challenges due to varying levels of needs. The schools had remained opened for children whilst still providing remote learning for days that the children were not in. Online resources were made available to families which were tailored to different needs or individual children.

A Guest in attendance on behalf of a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) said that a lot of investment had gone into establishing a learning platform which worked very well and the virtual access to learning had proved invaluable as many of the children were engaging in ways they may not necessarily have had they had to attend school. Take up on engagement with virtual learning was high with students producing good work. There were however difficulties with new young people that had moved into the borough and being able to engage and establish a relationship under these conditions.

Other Guests commented that the focus had also been to ensure that there were opportunities for creative learning and practical activities for children to do so as to limit some of the time spent on screens. Teachers were proactive on feedback and marking of work and children were responding to those comments and making improvements were necessary.

All in attendance had experienced issues with delay in provision of laptop devices for learning and it was asked to what extent issues were experienced and how many young people were without devices. Officers said that in the first lockdown there had been delays and the DfE asked Local Authorities to lead on provision and they calculated the number of devices they would supply. This second lockdown schools had been charged with applying directly and were allocated a number of laptops. There was still a gap as schools have had to use their own devices or invite children to come into schools where they have identified issues with access. The voluntary sector and local communities had been invaluable in the support they had provided. There would however still be cases of families where children were working on phones and schools have ensured good oversight in understanding and responding to circumstances of families. It was disappointing that Infant schools had not been included in the allocation of devices and many had to commission their own school based laptops to families.

A Guest said that whilst there were issues with supply of learning devices, the problems experienced by families was also about provision of training on usage. Schools have had to invest in the infrastructure and systems to guide families on using devices safely and appropriately. More work was needed on engagement and empowering parents who may have difficulties due to varying barriers such as language, on use of devices and technology.

It was further commented by a Member that some families had children with varying needs and what consideration was being given to supporting needs. Guests informed the Sub-Committee that various methods were established in different schools. Families with children that had been identified as requiring additional support such as children with learning disabilities had invitations extended for the children to conduct their remote learning at school. There was also provision of family learning activities that parents can do with their children. In order to support parents, drop in sessions were being offered as well as welfare calls every week to find out how remote learning was progressing. Behaviour specialists were also in contact with families to provide advice and additional support and families can self refer to the liaison officer if they require extra help.

A Point of discussion was on what provision was in place to ameliorate isolation, uncertainty and anxiety experiences by children and families. Guests stressed the importance of larger community solution with issues faced by families as a result of the pandemic such as financial and housing. A Guest commented on the work that was being done as part of the Croydon Trauma Partnership who provide drop in services such as counselling for parents as well as children. They also delivered outreach doorstep visits and that the service had been invaluable to the schools that were part of the partnership. It was important to invest in human resource that could be made available across the whole of the borough.

During discussions on resourcing for staff and ensuring that their wellbeing remained a priority, Members learned that staff had been provided with

additional training during the end of the summer term to prepare them for further lockdowns and increased instances of remote learning

In response to a Member question on how the current remote learning style would impact the catch up programme that had been established, the Interim Director of Education responded that these were the conversations that were currently taking place across the directorate and going forward with all head teachers. Further exploration of this was needed as to what the curriculum should look like, and what the vision was for education. The focus should be on teacher assessment and working with children to fill in the gaps in terms of curriculum. This had changed since the report was written and the directorate must continuously adapt to the emerging picture and responding to the long term impact on children. It was pointed out that a concern for the future echoed by many heads was the lack of clarity on the appropriate model for remote learning. There was disparity across schools as to the interpretation and meaning of the term as this greatly impacts on workload. Clarity was needed from the Department for Education on what remote learning should look like as the current expectation of teachers who were been given so much to do was currently not sustainable

The Chair thanked the Head Teachers in attendance on behalf of the Sub-Committee for their engagement in these extremely valuable discussions and stated their responses to the challenge in such difficult and uncertain circumstances was heartening. They were thanked for all the work they were doing for the children and families of Croydon

The Interim Director of Education also extended thanks to the Head Teachers for joining the meeting and the impressive way that they had approached the challenges presented by the pandemic over the course of the last year. The different context and approaches adopted by each school in this large and complex borough was acknowledged and praised alongside maintenance of line of sight of welfare of teachers and all staff in schools.

In reaching its recommendations Sub-Committee came to the following

Conclusions:

1. The attendance and contribution of the Head Teachers was welcomed and positive.
2. It was clear that whilst there were issues with provision and availability of suitable devices to support virtual learning, the importance of resources to strengthen parental engagement and ability to support their child/children must remain an area of focus and priority.
3. It was concerning and disappointing that Infants section of schools had not been included in the Department for Education's roll out of devices for schools.
4. In looking forward, it was important that the department prioritise measuring of inequality on attainment gaps as a consequence of the pandemic and explore ways to address the gaps identified.

5. Direction was needed from the Department for Education on clarification of the terminology of remote working as it was evident that there were differences in interpretation in different institutions.

The Sub-Committee **Recommended** that:

1. That a means be found to measure the inequalities in attainment gap caused by the pandemic and that focussed evidenced efforts are made to close the gap over time.
2. That the number of children who do not have access to the necessary equipment for remote learning are quantified, especially for those in Secondary schools, and that closing that gap is made a priority.

12/21 What difference has this meeting made to Croydon's children

- The participation of Head Teachers was invaluable as it was important to have the voice of end users in meetings. Going forward this must be incorporated into more meetings, in particular the voice of the child.
- The Preparatory meetings that took place prior to Committee meetings were invaluable. A Commitment was needed from Members to attend in order to ensure that they are well informed prior to formal meetings.
- This was a large agenda and going forward it would be important to limit the amount of items being discussed in order to keep the meetings focused.
- The Sub-Committee to discuss the areas of priorities of meetings for the next municipal year as the work programme should be developed in line with the Croydon Renewal Plan which will affect Scrutiny.
- There were possibilities for increased Task and Finish groups in order to enable delving into specific areas or topics that is not able to be covered in depth in Committee meetings.
- At the end of each item it would be useful to specifically recap to officers when they were expected to come back to the committee with items of requests such as further information or briefing notes.
- There was a concern that many of the reports presented with included many of the positives and what was working well but not enough on things that had not worked so well or had been challenging. Going forward Officers would be asked to ensure that they include things that had not gone so well to enable members to make informed decisions on topics that required further investigation.

13/21 Work Programme 2020/21

The work programme was noted for the remainder of the municipal year.

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The meeting ended at 9.58 pm

Signed:

Date: