

Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee

Meeting of held on Tuesday, 20 April 2021 at 6.30 pm in 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, Bernadette Khan, Helen Pollard and Louisa Woodley

Co-optee Members

Josephine Copeland (Non-voting Teacher 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 Families and Education
Debbie Jones, Executive Director for Children Families and Education
Roisin Madden, Interim Director for Early Help and Children's Social Care
Kerry Crichlow, Interim Director Improvement and Quality, Children, Families and Education Department
Shelley Davies, Interim Director of Education

Apologies: Leo Morrell

PART A

24/21 Apologies for absence

Apologies received from Leo Morrell

25/21 Disclosures of interest

There were no disclosures of interest.

26/21 Urgent Business (if any)

There was none.

27/21 Action list update

The sub-committee went through the latest version of the actions list and the following was noted:

- An agreement had been made for the Chair to meet on an annual basis with the regional commissioner.

- The interim Director of Education informed members that officers were regularly in contact with children currently attending Virgo Fidelis and their families supporting them through the in-year admission process. There was confidence in the progress being made to find alternative schools for pupils.
- There had been a number of devices sourced through the community for pupils that did not have one and they had been delivered to those families. There was still approximately 1k pupils in the borough with access to IT.
- The issue of child and adolescent mental health was a concern locally and nationally with emerging issues and evidence coming forward which would be responded to accordingly.

28/21 Early Help CSC and Education Dashboard

The Director of Early Help and Social Care introduced the dashboard and following the presentation, Members had the opportunity to ask questions.

It was asked what the update was on staff morale in terms of recruitment during this period of strict Covid restrictions. Officers said that there had been some success with recruitment in children with disabilities team. HR was assisting with revamping the job advert, with the social worker and advanced social worker roles being profiled separately. The retention fee for Croydon had been reduced in line with the current budget. The pressures on current staff amidst vacancies was acknowledged and all was being done to manage the recruitment process as quickly and efficiently as possible.

It was asked if there had been any mental health concerns among staff and what the response was to address issues. Officers said that all staff had been impacted emotionally by the pandemic in particular due to the longevity of the situation. Some staff has lost colleagues as well as family members and there was supportive resources provided by the Council, the professional body of social work and the unions providing independent support. There was in house mental health support available and it had been made clear that managers had to support staff to access the support as and when needed.

In response to a question on what could be done better to improve services. Officers said that there had been challenge and pressure with referrals and re- referrals. Senior officers were conducting analysis of re-referrals to explore whether they were being made as a result of the same issues or new issues and what could be done to mitigate matters.

It was asked if the Council's financial pressures was impacting getting children off the Child Protection register or compromising the quality of care received. Officers said that service managers reviewed cases thoroughly and challenge decisions where necessary. If a child was returned to CP a written report was sent to the director detailing why the child had been returned to a

CP plan. Managers are made aware and clear of risks, and decisions were not made on the basis of finances.

Then Chair thanked officers for the response to questions

The Interim Director of Education presented the Education dashboard and it was noted that there had been instances of more permanent exclusions this month, all of which were being followed up. The Head of Virtual Schools was working closely to support the schools to find alternative pathways to permanent exclusions.

It was asked how the effectiveness and value for money provision for SEN pupils was determined. Officers said that annual reviews were conducted to determine effectiveness of provision. Reviews were conducted in conjunction with families. The Elective Home Education reviews were also conducted annually with assurance sought that the child, parents and LA were confident that this was the best situation for the child and for many this was a successful and positive arrangement. Reviews had been a challenge during lockdown and as a result there was a current backlog which the department was addressing as a priority through bringing in additional resource to manage the process.

It was further asked what actions followed where a child was being electively home educated and the provision was inadequate. Officers said that where the child was on an EHCP plan, the LA was able to intervene due to its statutory responsibility but in other instances, the LA had limited power due to parental choice and decision. A referral could be made through safeguarding route but there was limited quality assurance on outcome due to lack of LA role and responsibility.

It was commented that the percentage to Pupil Referral Unit schools at 100% that were outstanding provisions was an achievement that should be celebrated.

The Chair thanked officers for their responses to questions.

The Sub-Committee came to the following conclusions

1. The Education dashboard was lacking information on SEN reviews and it was important that the dashboard be inclusive of all the children in Croydon that we serve
2. The percentage of PRU that are rated by Ofsted as Good or Outstanding was an achievement to be celebrated. Additionally the overall high quality of both primary and secondary schools in the borough was commended.
3. The steps that were being taken to address vacancy rates in Children's Social care was encouraging.
4. Commended the continued use of technology where it enables more efficient and effective service provision.

The Sub-Committee recommended that

1. Future dashboards contain information that accurately reflects the landscape for SEN children and the Chair to reach an agreement with the Interim Director of Education of the level of information to be shared.
2. Including data on 19-21 year old NEETs to enable comparison against national benchmarks

29/21 Service Impact and Budget Update

The Executive Director of Children Families and Education introduced the item and the following was highlighted:

- The Education Directorate and strong community of diverse schools who work together very well and will be key going forward in response post pandemic was commendable.
- The quality of social work practice due to introduction of the systemic model of practice which was vital in improving the Ofsted judgement from inadequate to good had made significant difference to the service which was demonstrated through ongoing case audits.
- There were still areas of weakness with increased vacancy rates in frontline services and management which was being addressed through ongoing work with HR department.
- The Leaving care team which was judged as requiring improvement remained an area of priority.
- Maintaining the budget remained a challenge.
- An upcoming Ofsted visit would cause a lot of work and anxiety for staff and would require a lot of resources.

Members had the opportunity to ask questions.

Assurance was sought on the governance of the delivery plan and it was asked what Scrutiny's role was in the process. Officers said that they worked to ensure that the information provided was the same as presented to others such as Cabinet and the Improvement Board in order to maintain proportionality. The governance of performance framework and management sat within existing frameworks with savings projects for different areas of the service embedded in the current structure.

A Member further challenged that the delivery plan which was good in terms of overview sets out a number of issues, primarily the oversight of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee was not mentioned. This would give an indication that there was no role for Scrutiny and this was unacceptable given that the role of other committees had been mentioned in the Plan. Officers acknowledged the challenge and said that there was more work to be done to finalise how Scrutiny and governance of the overall plan would fit together. This was a live plan and some details had changed since the report was written. The Executive Director added that Scrutiny did indeed have a vital role.

It was asked what level of engagement took place with children and families in formulating the Plan as it was important that reports reflected the voice of service users and that the Council was listening and engaging with its residents. Officers said that children and families were involved in putting together the key principles of the systemic practice which had fed into the Delivery Plan.

A question was asked what processes followed when a family or young person had criticism of an aspect of the service. Officers said that as part of audit processes, built conversations between children and carers were recorded and evaluated as part of the quality assurance process. The thematic learning enabled issues to be raised and dealt with and as audits were conducted by managers, if serious problems were highlighted, they were escalated through senior line management. There was some ongoing thoughts and conversations taking place as to how to involve corporate parenting into the process to sit alongside work from the youth engagement team, outreach work and the complaints process which all feed into the audit process.

In response to a question of whether there was a reduction on finances for Children in Need due to financial pressures of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC). Officers said that there were controllable and uncontrollable elements of finance for UASC. There was no control in the numbers that presented to Croydon but the Council was able to manage the efficiency of commissioning of placements and review of care package for these children. The details presented in the report was to distinguish between uncontrollable cost drivers not controllable within the parameters of the Plan. It was added that it was clear that Croydon had been providing a good service for UASC but this had resulted on additional pressures and the external funding received from the DfE and Home office was not sufficient. This however had not impacted on the quality of services for local children and there was constant lobbying and negotiation taking place to receive proportionate remuneration to support UASC.

The Chair thanked officers for their engagement with the sub-committee.

Request for info

The Bright Sparks survey which details the experiences of young people to be circulated

The Sub-Committee came to the following conclusions

1. It was very concerning that the role of Scrutiny was not included in the assurance process of the draft Children Families and Education Improvement Plan 2021-24
2. It was disappointing that the Children's Improvement Board work programme had been developed without consultation with the Sub-Committee or GPAC on its own work programme in order to avoid duplication

3. The Plan was well written and robust but some of the language used was ambiguous. It was important that officers be mindful of the language used which could lead to unintended interpretation.

The Sub-Committee recommended that

1. The Draft Children, Families and Education Delivery Plan 2021-24 be reviewed to ensure appropriate acknowledgement and inclusion of Scrutiny in its governance and assurance mechanisms.
2. The Plan to be circulated to all Councillors with a briefing note that explains the challenges and for all other departments to follow this lead when writing the plan for their service

30/21 Update: Task and Finish Group, Exclusions and Offrolling in Croydon Schools

The Chair of the Task and Finish Group (TFG) Councillor Jerry Fitzpatrick introduced the item and stated that this was the third interim report being presented to the sub-committee.

The final report was due to be presented at this meeting but it had been agreed to postpone in light of the politically restricted period ahead of the upcoming Greater London Authority Elections and the Croydon Bi-Elections on 6 May 2021.

Expression of thanks was extended to Councillor Callton Young for his input prior to stepping down in October 2020.

In response to a question on whether there was a disparity in exclusions and off rolling figures between the north and south of the borough and what advocacy measures were in place for families. The Chairs of the TFG said that in terms of disparity, geographical origin was not necessarily recorded as where children attended school was not always where they lived. The key point was the significant disproportion in numbers of BME or Dual heritage boys that were being permanently excluded. The significant issue was also with the experience of parents and the children whom by the time they had gone through the process and were at the point of a managed move, they had resolved themselves to and were ready for the move. It was vital that there be provision for more support to enable children to remain in schools. Many parents and children find the process difficult and oppressive and this had to change.

Further detailed discussions would take place when the final report with its substantive recommendation is received at an upcoming meeting

The Sub-Committee **AGREED** to

- (i) to note the report;

(ii) to support the requests of Task and Finish Group for data which the Task and Finish Group believes will assist it to enable it to arrive at sound conclusions and recommendations;

(iii) to schedule a meeting between 6 and 22 July 2021 at which the TFG will present its final report.

31/21 What difference has this meeting made to Croydon's children

The Sub-Committee agreed to continue to hold themselves to account to ensure that they continue to challenge as appropriate to ensure the best outcomes for children and young people in the Borough.

32/21 Work Programme

The Chair introduced the item by referring to the report that was commissioned by the Centre for Public Governance which highlighted the importance of effective work programming.

Discussions on how to build the work programme for the 2021/22 municipal year took place and the following was noted:

1. The sub-committee to explore means to involve residents in work programming such as calling for submission of topic items.
2. There was a risk of duplication due to the various children's boards that also scrutinised performance and it was important to collaborate with officers to mitigate.
3. It was vital to ensure that meetings were not over crowded with agenda items. Working out priorities and being effective
4. A commitment was made by Members to reduce the number of items for scrutiny to a manageable list and prioritise.
5. Improvement to be made to the language used in reports
6. Focus should be on oversight of finances and the budget
7. Input from young people was vital

Following discussions, it was agreed that the Chair would put together and circulate a questionnaire on areas on priority and focus to be completed by Members of the sub-committee.

The committee concluded that future meetings will continue to be held virtually given that this is permitted by legislation and that the committee believes their work is at least as effective as it would be were the meetings to be held in person.

It was also agreed that the sub-committee meet to discuss the work programme in detail in June 2021

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The meeting ended at 9.50 pm

Signed:

Date: