

Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee

Meeting of held on Tuesday, 22 June 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 Sue Bennett, Bernadette Khan, Shafi Khan and Louisa Woodley

Co-optee Members

Josephine Copeland (Non-voting Teacher representative)

Also Present: Councillor Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Learning
Councillor Maddie Henson, Deputy Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Learning
Councillor Helen Redfern, Shadow Cabinet Member: Children, Young People & Learning
Councillor Mike Bonello
Councillor Ola Kolade
Debbie Jones, Interim Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care
Kerry Crichlow, Interim Director of Improvement and Quality
Kate Bingham, Interim Head of Finance - Children, Families and Education
Pasquale Brammer, Head of Integrated Commissioning and Procurement (Children, Families and Education)
Harold Bennison, SLAM
Gordon Knott, Croydon Drop In
Patrick Shields, St Mary's School
Karen Stott, Talk off the Record

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Apologies: Elaine Jones and Paul O'Donnell

PART A

33/21 Apologies for absence

Apologies received from Elaine Jones and Paul O'Donnell

34/21 Minutes of the previous sub-committee meeting

The minutes of the meeting of 20 April 2020 was agreed as an accurate record.

35/21 Disclosures of interest

There were none.

36/21 Urgent Business (if any)

There was none.

37/21 Action list update

There were no action to be updated on.

38/21 Covid Response- Emotional Well Being and Children's Mental Health

The Head of Commissioning and Procurement introduced the item, with invited guests outlining details in a [Presentation](#).

Following the presentations, Members' had the opportunity to raise questions.

In response to a question on when services would resume face to face contact with children and young people, Members were informed that services were slowly increasing the amount of face to face contact. All contact was completed under strict Covid guidelines using correct PPE. It had emerged that some young people preferred online contact and this was still being offered. The Single Point of Contact service continued to receive referrals throughout the pandemic although there was a significant reduction in the early stages, referrals were now increasing to pre pandemic levels.

It was further asked what the figures of children contacted weekly by services were and Members were informed that services were back up to 60% face to face contact. Many young people preferred the alternative means of contact as some did not want to travel to offices in central Croydon at this time. Both Croydon Drop In and Off the Record have always worked on a self-referral basis and this had not changed.

In relation to contact with younger children, Members were advised that at least 50% of children worked with were between the ages of 10-13. The advantage of other means of contact such as telephone was that therapist were able to engage with parents of carers which may not have been the case previously.

A Member questioned what consideration if any was being given to extend the trailblazer funding that had 30 schools involved in the project to the rest of the schools in the Borough. Members were advised that the numbers of schools involved in Trailblazers came from commissioners, most of the work to date was in primary schools and was done in conjunction with parents. It had been difficult to get secondary schools involved although they were being encouraged to participate. There was another Trailblazer project running across South West London for colleges and post 16. It was important to note that there wasn't a school in the Borough demanding to be involved that was not yet involved.

In response to a question on what mechanisms were in place to capture hidden harm and what support there was available for children and families, officers said that there were several routes for young people to contact and seek support. Partners were working to streamline pathways in order to ensure they were clear and accessible. Investigations were taking place at national level to capture what was happening through surveys which gave insight to what was occurring. One of the lessons learnt was for agencies not to make assumptions and that whilst there had been an increase in hidden harm, this was not actually in the cohort of children that were previously known or were accessing services. Those deeply affected by events of the pandemic were children that had not previously accessed services.

It was asked if there were children who had not returned to school and what actions had been taken. An invited Guest commented that at his school, attendance was higher than it had been pre-pandemic. The school had been able to foster good connections with families who had not engaged in the past. Throughout the pandemic, engagement by students online was closely monitored with home visits conducted where appropriate. Staff were vigilant in spotting changes in behaviours.

Further information would be sought on missing numbers of children from schools as well as data on SEN children who may have been disproportionately impacted by events of Covid-19 and the details on specific outcomes for that group.

A Member asked what were the wait times for detailed intervention and assessment for young people from mental health services. Officers said that following initial assessment there was a wait time of between seven to ten weeks for ongoing regular counselling. During the wait period contact was maintained and there was an offer of short-term intervention where necessary.

In Child Adolescence Mental Health Services, different pathways had differing wait times. Eating disorders had wait times of between one to four weeks, Crisis and follow-up was up to one week. The average wait time for other services was 13 weeks. In the Autism Pathway, there were approximate wait times of over 52 weeks for assessment. One of the drivers for the long wait times was the pathway which was different to others in the rest of the country and as a result the services were being redesigned.

It was challenged that the level of wait times was unacceptable in a number of areas of service and in light of the Council's restructure to reduce spend, it was asked how the budget would impact on post-pandemic recovery. Officers said that the majority of funding for CAMHS and mental health was from the Clinical Commissioning Group. There were some joint contracts which resulted in some funding from the Council and there were no mass cuts planned as part of the Council's reconfiguration. There were several streams that contributed to the situation of the service such as badly planned pathways, workforce issues, which was a national and well as local issue and the level of complex needs.

It was commented that if substantial reconfiguration of the service was being undertaken, this would require further Scrutiny by the Health and Social Care Sub-Committee and a conversation would need to take place with officers to facilitate a meeting.

The Chair thanked officers and invited guests for their contribution to the meeting.

In reaching its recommendations, the Sub-Committee came to the following conclusions

1. The support being provided to families by schools and the voluntary service was commendable
2. It was important that services explore ways to capture and monitor issues that manifest over time, especially those where issues may be manifesting differently due to the unique challenges of the pandemic.
3. The monitoring on different challenges in contact with families in order to track emerging issues was crucial.
4. It was evident that there was now increased need for services and understanding and monitoring of need was essential.
5. There were serious concerns regarding the waiting times for some services in CAHMS and it was welcomed that a substantial reform of its services was being undertaken.
6. It was important to understand the effects and responses from services of lockdown on children and young people with severe learning difficulties and profound multiple learning difficulties.

The Sub-Committee recommended that

1. That the CAHMS service provide a report to the Health and Social Care sub-committee on the reconfiguration of its services and how this will impact or improve the unacceptable levels of waiting times for assessment in some areas of its service.
2. That the CAHMS service report back to the Children and Young People sub-committee on targets for waiting times and monitoring framework.
3. That services explore ways and options of being more systematic about hidden harm.

Request for info:

- Data on children who accessed the service on a regular basis pre pandemic who had not been back in contact.
- A short briefing on the specific response by services on the effects of lockdown on children with severe learning difficulties and profound and multiple learning difficulties and how outcomes were being measured.

The Interim Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care introduced the report and the following was noted:

- Staff had begun to return to the offices of Bernard Weatherill House under clear Covid safe conditions.
- Children at highest risk continued as they had been throughout the pandemic, to receive face to face visits. There were instances where a family member may have tested positive for Covid and ways of assessments was a decision that continued to be made on a case by case basis.
- Virtual visits will cease for children that require statutory visits as face to face was to recommence.
- A recent Ofsted visit had taken place which was not an inspection. They focused on the practices in the frontline section. The draft letter will be published in a few weeks and the department was confident of favourable feedback.
- There has been six exclusions rescinded

The sub-committee had the opportunity to ask questions

It was commented that there had been a noted increase in exclusions and officers responded that it had since been identified that six had been rescinded and a request would be made to the Interim Director of Education to provide further information as to the reasons behind the decision.

It was asked how Croydon Music and Arts was being funded as the £13k for the service had been removed from the General Fund. Officers said that this was correct as there was no longer additional funding from the Council for the service as it was able to operate without it. Croydon Music and Arts was self-funding, primarily through grants, which was in common with other LA's.

An update was requested on the departments Transformation Funding. Officers said transformation funding had been utilised for transformation purposes only, with extensive work undertaken to ensure this. There had been success with a number of bids and there remained stringent reviews of spending. There had been success in support for short term court work teams to address loss of expert capacity in social work for families. There was targeted work on recruitment and retention with a focus on use of diverse media. There was some short term capacity on foster care department.

It was asked what the alternative would be if the departments could not achieve the savings indicated in the report. Officers said that in being transparent at the end of period two and if the identified savings were not made, the reality was that the savings would have to be found elsewhere.

It was requested that officers start reporting identified additional savings in the event that savings could not be achieved once finalised as it was expected that officers should have commenced discussions on the proposals.

The Chair added that through offline robust discussions that had taken place, he was reassured on the transparency of activities of the service that had been reported.

A Member commented that building skills in fostering was crucial to ensure future savings could be made and improve services for the children and families served.

Clarification was sought on the discrepancy in the figures in the DSG block figures for 2019/20 and 2020/21 and officers agreed to provide a response to this following the meeting.

The Sub-Committee came to the following conclusions

1. The report presented was detailed and provided a clear picture of the situation in the departments.
2. The sub-committee was reassured that the department was on track with its savings proposals and were keeping line of sight by reviewing on a regular basis
3. The sub-committee looked forward to the Ofsted letter when published following the recent visit.
4. There was interest in the rise of children with ECHP Plan and the sub-committee would welcome a report of the reasons behind the increase.

Actions/Request for information

- Data on school attendance numbers
- Data on offer for children with SEN in terms of identifying hidden harm
- Data on children in EHCP plans
- Report states 6 exclusions had been rescinded, what does this mean? What was the process behind this decision and should it be changed to avoid stress to the families involved?
- The report details discrepancies in figures on the schools DSG Block balances of 2019/20 and 2021, an explanation of the balances to be provided

40/21 Refreshed Children's Improvement Plan

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

- This was a refresh of the continuous improvement plan and brings together two elements, the savings and growth planned over 2021/2024 in particular those that needed to be achieved over a number of years. Also the practice improvement priority for Early Help and Children's Social Care, as per the ILACS recommendations from 2020
- The plan was a three years plan with an annual review process through the Children's Improvement Board.

- There was a proposal for quarterly reports to the Children’s Scrutiny Sub-Committee to look at the progress against the savings as well as the practice improvement priorities
- Work was still needed on Scrutiny challenge and assurance role and strengthening links with the improvement board whilst avoiding duplication.

There was challenge on equalities outcomes and how this was ensured for children and families. It was asked how this outcome would be captured. Officers said that this was also a point made by the staff representative improvement board. It was acknowledged that this has not been addressed in the report and a meeting was being convened by officers to discuss this point and how to positively promote equality as part of the work being done

It was commented that the report had indicated projects that had dropped off and items that were at risk, the detail behind this had to be made clearer in future reporting.

It was commented that dialogue was needed on presentation of the quarterly report prior to the next meeting.

Members were encouraged to send further comments as indicated in the report by 29 June 2021

The Chair thanked officers for their attendance and responses to questions.

In reaching its recommendations, the Sub-Committee came to the following conclusions:

1. The sub-committee welcomed the proposals on a quarterly progress report being included in its work programme.
2. It was clear that further work needed to be done on governance assurance, strengthening of interface with the sub-committee without duplication.
3. The Plan was lacking in detailing achievement of equalities outcomes for children.
4. It would appear on the report that some projects had ‘dropped off’ and with limited detail as to the reason. Reassurance was needed on the reason why those projects had ‘dropped off’.

The Sub-Committee recommended that

1. The Chair work closely with officers on what the quarterly progress report that would be presented to the committee would look like.
2. That quarterly reports detail all completed projects or projects that had ‘dropped off’ and the reasons for this
3. The Improvement Plan detail achievement of equalities outcomes for children and families.

The Executive Director for Children Families and Education introduced the item and outlined details in a [Presentation](#).

Following the presentation, Members had the opportunity to ask questions.

The Chair summarised that:

- It was clear that Croydon wanted to take care of all children in need despite the current climate
- Some progress had been made in trying to get other Local Authorities to share responsibility for UASC through the Pan London Agreement.
- Members were unanimous in their belief that funding from central government was not adequate, in particular for the 18-25 year old group.
- The paper was referred to Scrutiny by Cabinet but it was unclear what was being asked of the sub-committee.

It was commented that there was uncertainty as to whether this meeting was a pre decision Scrutiny exercise or just an information giving exercise. Officers said that there were two issues for consideration, the need to reduce the number of UASC children in Croydon and also the funding gap. Solutions were being sought for both issues and a decision would have to be taken to reduce the pressure on Croydon. The Cabinet Member for Children Families and Education added that the issues presented a number of complexities, the details of which were being presented for noting by Scrutiny at this stage to bring awareness that decisions on safeguarding and risk may have to be taken where relevant with little notice. There would be an opportunity for further discussions but it was vital that Scrutiny had early oversight of the situation.

In response to a question on what measure were in place to maintain the budget , officers said that they were working towards ensuring that they could get the best value for placements but more needed to be done in this area.

It was clear that a meeting would need to take place to discuss the matter in detail and it was agreed for an informal meeting to take place in the coming weeks to discuss the options in greater depth.

In reaching its recommendation the Sub-Committee came to the following conclusions:

1. It was encouraging that the need to take care of all children despite the current climate was behind all decision making
2. There had been some progress made through the Pan London agreement
3. The additional funding from government was welcome. The revisions to the National Transfer Scheme will need to be judged on whether it is effective in addressing the issues facing Croydon.
4. There were still serious concerns regarding the level of funding received from government which was not enough to support and

provide services for UASC and, mainly, the resulting disproportionate number of Looked After Children in Croydon due to the large number of former UASC

5. It was unclear what was being asked of the Children and Young People sub-committee by Cabinet who recommended that this report be presented to the sub-committee. The Cabinet Member clarified that the significant costs were not sustainable, especially given the Council's serious financial position. Consequently decisions will need to be made soon on what action to take. The Cabinet requests that the assumptions in the report are challenged at Scrutiny so that any decision is based on a robust and well-founded information.

The Sub-Committee recommended that:

7. The Chair engage in further discussion with officers to obtain reassurance on the robustness of the case which will be the foundation of a future Cabinet decision.

Action/Request for info

- Data on UASC in employment or further education

42/21 What difference has this meeting made to Croydon's children

Following discussions, the sub-committee agreed that:

- There was notable improvement in the quality of reports and presentations being provided
- There was improvements to be made to the children's complaints process.
- There were still issues with ensuring representation of the voice of the child and service users in meetings.
- Improvements to be made on line of sight from the workforce and service users perspective
- It would be beneficial when the climate permits, to resume the visits programme
- Members to explore what how other Local Authorities involved children and young people in their committee meetings
- The Chair to explore opportunities for young people 'take over' of a committee meeting.

The work programme was discussed and it was agreed the work programme for 2021/22 was flexible and there was a need for an understanding of how Scrutiny fits in with the work being completed by Cabinet, General Purpose and Audit Committee as well as the Children's Improvement Board in order to alleviate instances of duplication.

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In reference to the Scrutiny Annual report 2020/2021 which had been published and could be found [here](#), it was agreed that Members were confident in their ability to continue to hold the executive and cabinet member to account, It was vital that the sub-committee continue to maintain sight of the budget, ensure that officers were maintaining a sustainable and safe delivery of service.

The meeting ended at 9.35 pm

Signed:

Date: