

Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee

Meeting of Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee held on Tuesday, 22 March 2022 at 6.30 pm. This meeting was held remotely.

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Robert Ward (Chair);
Councillor Sean Fitzsimons (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Sue Bennett, Bernadette Khan, Ola Kolade, Louisa Woodley and Mary Croos (In place of Jerry Fitzpatrick)

Co-optee Members

Josephine Copeland (Non-voting Teacher representative)

Also

Present: Councillor Alisa Flemming (Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Learning)
Councillor Maria Gatland (Shadow Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Learning)
Debbie Jones (Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education)
Shaun Hanks (Head of Service for Children Looked After and Care Experienced)
Kerry Crichlow (Director for Quality Commissioning & Performance)
Shelley Davies (Director for Education)
Fiona Martin (Detective Superintendent for Public Protection for the Metropolitan Police)
Elaine Clancy (Chief Nurse for Croydon CCG and Croydon Health Services)

Apologies: Councillors Alisa Flemming and Bernadette Khan for lateness;
Co-optee Members Elaine Jones and Paul O'Donnell

PART A

16/22 Apologies for Absence

Apologies received from Councillor Robert Fitzpatrick who was substituted by Councillor Mary Croos.

Apologies received from Co-optee Members Elaine Jones and Paul O'Donnell.

Apologies for lateness received from Councillors Bernadette Khan and Alisa Flemming.

17/22 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

There were no minutes circulated for consideration at this meeting.

18/22 Disclosures of Interest

There was none.

19/22 Urgent Business (if any)

There was none.

20/22 Action List Update

The Chair addressed that the majority of items on the action list had been completed, though there were a few outstanding items. There were new items such as the health visiting performance that was suggested for the new Sub-Committee in the new municipal year, to review.

Overall the action list was in a better position.

21/22 Early Help, Children Social Care & Education Dashboards

The Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee considered the January 2022 Children Social Care & Education Dashboard, which provided an overview of the performance within the service.

It was noted by the Sub-Committee that the staffing levels were generally good in the green zone, though timescales were still in red and yellow zones and required rapid improvement.

22/22 Home Education in Croydon

The Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee considered the Home Education in Croydon report, which had previously been highlighted by the Sub-Committee as a potential area of concern in need of further scrutiny.

The Sub-Committee received an overview from the Director of Education, Shelley Davies, who highlighted the following:

- There were currently 635 children registered as elected education with reasons as provided within the report.
- The covid-19 pandemic had impacted family's decision in education and sending children to school, though parents are legally within their rights to elected education at home.
- Safeguarding and staffing had also been addressed within the report.

In response to queries raised by the Sub-Committee, the Director of Education, clarified the following:

- In relation to the safeguarding of children that were home schooled, there were no inherent safeguarding risks for families planning to home educate their child, though if a school was to identify that a decision for home education was not appropriate for a specific individual, this would be followed up on a case-by-case basis in particular where there were safeguarding issues. There was also a safeguarding process in getting the child back to school which included notifying Children Missing Education, and Children's Services [if significant concerns were identified]. The Elected Home Education Team also worked closely with the safeguarding officer, where children would be visited every 6 months, or regularly if known to Children's Services.
- In relation to data and the 635 children registered for Elected Home Education, it was unknown of the breakdown of children in primary and secondary schools, though it was shared that anecdotally parent's decision to home school their child may often relate to a transition from primary school to secondary school, GCSE preparations or other factors. Additionally, elected home education may not be the right choice for families who may very well return their child back to school.
- In relation to the challenge of schools encouraging families to home educate their children, the service reviewed on the number of situations this had happened - an example which resulted in advice given to families to avoid exclusion. The service had addressed schools and families who needed to be supported in decision making instead of having been encouraged change that was not required for their children. It was important that education was not encouraged to be channelled at home other than what was right for the family.
- In relation to the high turnover of children moving from one local authority to another and whether there was a tracking process in place, the service acknowledged their liaison with the admission authorities in the neighbouring boroughs to ensure safeguarding is maintained. This meant that a child would remain enrolled at a school in one local authority until acknowledgement was verified by another local authority admission team. Where a child was not attending school or enrolled in another school this would alert that a child was missing from education and with safeguarding protocols in place the specialised teams would be notified.
- In relation to the suitability of elected home education and its performance, this was proven challenging to record as children were often visited once or twice yearly, where the determination of suitability would be made by professionally qualified teachers. It was noted that as there was no legislation for families to follow a specific framework or curriculum, the term suitable would not

necessarily mean the same curriculum and framework children would receive in schools, and thus the word suitability was to be used widely.

At 7pm Councillor Bernadette Khan attended the meeting.

- In relation to what indicators qualified educational provision, it was addressed that traditional schooling and the concept of education in public or at home was what constituted the ideology of education. The services were unable to determine choice on style of education for families and focused on reasons Elected Home Education was the chosen style to educate their child. It was recognised that the number of children being home schooled was increasing and the service focused on managing those families, by way of visiting, to ensure provision was good. This was accomplished by the elected home education staff worker who was a qualified teacher.

- In relation to tracking children who were taken out of mainstream and being home schooled, it was highlighted that a notification must be provided to the department by the family of their choice to home school. The service would then be able to keep a track record on the EHE register of all children and contact families to provide documents and other material to use.

In Conclusion, the Sub-Committee discussed the following:

Though it was recognised that the covid-19 pandemic had given families choice to home educate their children, there needed to be more data on Elected Home Education which was to include longitudinal study or case studies of success, the schools affected, ages of children, length of being home educated; additionally, the performance indicators on visits and lack of visits to children home educated.

The Chair further noted from the discussion that though there was the ability for parents to follow their own educational path, it would be interesting to review how many families follow the curriculum and framework, children completing exams and other data. Further, it was put forward that the Sub-Committee was to be clear on information required in the return to the Sub-Committee in the future.

The Chair thanks officers for their report.

23/22 Croydon Safeguarding Children Partnership

The Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee considered the Croydon Safeguarding Children Partnership report – namely the Child Safeguarding Practice Review, which provided an overview of partnerships working effectively together to protect children and young people in the

borough in particular identified lessons about working with vulnerable young and first-time mothers (and separated fathers) and the challenges of engagement in Universal and Early Help Services.

The Chair highlighted the sensitivity and seriousness of the case which was brought before the Sub-Committee and addressed that the focus of the report was the effectiveness of the partnership, and emphasised on three areas:

- The investigation: How can we do better; the things that happened and the actual event;
- The process of the way the safeguarding partnerships had evaluated what had happened and identified lessons learned; and
- What changed as a result – i.e., the multiagency action plan

Prior to the meeting the Sub-Committee received a summary of safeguarding practice review process (formally known as safeguarding case reviews) which highlighted the grounds the local authority was to take following a serious incident that included notifying the national panel.

The Head of Service for Children Looked After and Care Experienced, Shaun Hanks, highlighted that a rapid review, which was attended by all agencies together learnt immediate lessons, and as a result, more in-depth review was required which was the report presented to Sub-Committee.

Lessons learned had addressed the communication between the multi-agency partners particularly within the front door services which was now happening more frequently (on a monthly basis).

There was also an Independent Management Report that sought immediate practice of an agency and would feed into the bigger Safeguarding Practice Review.

The Detective Superintendent for Public Protection for the Metropolitan Police, Fiona Martin, addressed the Sub-Committee and highlighted their review on their system, the quantity of incoming referrals, how accidental and non-accidental injuries were undertaken, and information sharing.

Further reflection on the learning within the Police included working with the three boroughs (Croydon, Sutton and Lambeth) in understanding thresholds in strategy meetings and increasing the essential meetings to address strategies in safeguarding cases, working together with other agencies, and ensuring learning would be shared.

The Chief Nurse for Croydon CCG and Croydon Health Services, Elaine Clancy, addressed the Sub-Committee and highlighted that the health team had a governance plan which they used to educate, reinforce, increase awareness and other individual learning, in practice and in communication.

Following comments from Children's Services, Police and Health, the Sub-Committee shared their concern and sadness to the details read within the

report. A discussion of the report followed with queries raised by the Sub-Committee, and questions were answered as followed:

- In the question relating to the report highlighting that the father of the child was only heard during the review, what opportunities were agencies seeking in the engagement of parents, particularly fathers? The Head of Service for Children Looked After and Care Experienced shared that following the independent management review training sessions had been provided to staff to conduct better engagement with both parents during assessments. There was room for improvement in this area to also change language and to be more inquisitive around the relationships of a child's parents.
- In the question around the key indicator of neglect that highlighted a failure to make appointments, how could this be detected in the future and acted upon? The Chief Nurse for Croydon CCG and Croydon Health Services addressed the importance to improve health colleagues' professional curiosity as to why clients were cancelling appointments, though this was challenging as there were often cancellations or absent attendance from clients and as professionals the service needed to review protocol to address these issues to triangulate any risks or concern relating to an absent attendance.
- In the question around threshold, how had the criteria of eligibility changed in a family in such circumstances accessing resources; and, the service providers taking actions to work with the families. The Chief Nurse for Croydon CCG and Croydon Health Services addressed that at the time operational teams do not often know all the details, highlighting for better communication between partner agencies in how they identify risk to match the risk to a family. There were further points that had been identified for services to execute better communication for a clearer picture, which were part of the lessons learned. The Detective Superintendent for Public Protection for the Metropolitan Police added that there was evidence within the report of multi-agency working, information sharing, and help offered, though agencies needed to work on supporting non-engagement and how they could assist families to engage fruitfully.
- In the question around flawed decision making, how had this been addressed; also, the multi-agency working was often an issue in case reviews where it was often said there would be improvement in the future, thus concrete plans and stronger recommendations was required; further, were there any signs for support to the mother and what support was available to her? The Head of Service for Children Looked After and Care Experienced acknowledged the comments raised and highlighted that serious incident reviews were rare and found flawed decisions. The

decision taken to not conduct a child protection assessment was based on the information provided at the time of a referral, and upon review, the Children's Services recognised that they should not have had to rely on health services assessment of an action for their involvement to take place, adding that better communication should have been pursued by themselves; further, the conclusion of a no further action from Children's Services should have been sent back to the referrer. Going forward these errors had been tightened, which had been part of the lessons learned. The Safeguarding Partnership had also been conducting a series of ongoing audits to ensure lessons learned were maintained.

At 7:35pm Councillor Alisa Flemming attended the meeting.

- In the question around the clarity of partnership communication, would information such as, a child had not been seen by a health visitor for two years, be shared between agencies? The Head of Service for Children Looked After and Care Experienced highlighted that agencies do become involved with families and end their involvement after a period. Working with partnered agencies historic information would be shared, though GP records were strictly confidential. There were known information sharing issues with what could and could not be shared, which often affected how information was gathered and concluded, and this issue was amongst lessons to be learned to be better.
- In a supplementary question, not attending medical checks was deemed as an indicator of neglect, does Croydon have a policy in place around children who did not attend their medical checks? The Chief Nurse for Croydon CCG and Croydon Health Services confirmed that there were policies in places for non-attendance of medical appointments where risk management would be addressed to assess the next steps. In addition to professional curiosity, staff also would need to be trained on identifying and understanding risks to ensure the policies in place were followed through.

In the question around the status of a child in need, and supervision model for social workers, the Head of Service for Children Looked After and Care Experienced informed that in relation to a child in need, there was no push for service involvement and a choice was also given to families, though, this choice was omitted if there were safeguarding risks. In relation to supervision, this was taken in two-fold on a monthly frequency, (1) to discuss children and young person in cases in addition to and (2) personal supervision to discuss personal coping and pressures, viewpoints for reflection, challenges and sharing risk.

In further discussion, the Chair highlighted that there needed to be more evidence of improved communication between partners and in addition the multi-agency plan needed to be visible. Also, that performance indicators was to be presented to further evidence the changes following the review of multi-

agency partnership, as this would review at the way in which communications between safeguarding partners had improved, visits were better managed, and other risks mentioned.

The Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education, Debbie Jones, addressed the Sub-Committee and shared that upon review the work that had happened since the incident had been evidenced by the regulator and inspection which took place in 2021. Further, that the purpose of a multi-agency plan was to be regularly reviewed and tested through various assurance mechanisms internally and externally, and the evidence of changes to the process was the work undertaken by the safeguarding partnership and safeguarding partners, which included Ofsted.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families, Alisa Flemming, addressed the Sub-Committee and indicated upon reflection that there had been a change of processes following the outcome of the serious review, particularly around the front door services in Children Services, in the way data was shared, and gaining consent for information to be shared was also received. The time it took to share information or follow up with a decision from a referral was also recognised as a factor for change, and that the performance indicators would better reflect the evidence of changes made.

In conclusion, the Sub-Committee noted that lessons had been learned, nevertheless, highlighted that they would like to see more:

- Evidence of improved communication happening between agency partnership.
- Better communication of how missed appointments was received, and evidence of risks improved.
- Evidence of improving fathers' involvement and for fathers to understand their rights.
- Frequent reviewing of concerned cases, which would provide insight in department position, service provision and allocation of resources.
- The importance to explore further in the lessons learned and feedback at the future Sub-Committee meetings.
- That the recommendation in 5A of the report was adhered to.

The Chair thanked all the officers present for their contribution to this item.

24/22 Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Learning

The Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Learning introduced the item and outlined the details in the [presentation](#).

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

A Member had asked a question in relation to historic pressures on Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) and the concerns on the possible arrival of Ukrainian children and others bringing more pressures in this area. The Cabinet Member responded that Croydon had a higher proportion of care experience leavers than any other London boroughs, and the impact of the current situation in Ukraine was in focus, where the Council's responsibility was to be a borough of sanctuary and support children and families and focus on balance and fair funding. The role of the Council was to ensure that children and young people had the opportunity to access emotional support and education, and support residents in this too. The Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education added that though support given to UASC was good, with lessons learned, those residents who would open their home would also require support in supporting USAC families, and this included a lot of funding.

A Member had asked a question in relation to the Council's finances as Children's Services had the largest budget spend and how officers were held to account for delivering current and future budget. The Cabinet Member responded that there were various ways the budget was reviewed, which included regular meetings with the Director of Social Care, Corporate Director for Children and Young People, Cabinet meetings, the Assurance Panel, and Children's Commissioning, where a line of sight and discussions of recruitment, retention, reviewing pressures and forecasting, spot purchasing and a sustainable model of delivering services were regularly reviewed. Additionally, meeting with social workers and EMPIRE (who have a standing invitation to the Corporate Parenting Panels) the Cabinet Member would listen and understand the impact of decisions and changes made; the front door and Early Help services were also recognised as working closely with partners ensured appropriate measures were taken.

A Member had a question in relation to the task and finishing group and the highest risk areas which may affect the budget that could be reviewed by the new Sub-Committee in the new municipal year. The Cabinet Member responded that the issues of county lines, exclusion rates, serious youth violence, and adultification were amongst issues to be addressed, as well as the impact of the covid-19 pandemic affecting mental harm and trauma, sexual exploitation, the impact of social media relating to bullying and safe usage and supporting traveller families in accessing education. The Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education added that the post pandemic hidden harm was an area where there was a rise in demand with significant pressures has yet to come.

A Member had asked a question in relation to the disproportional impact of black families with poverty and exclusion of all forms and the impact of covid-19 pandemic which shown a light of widened inequalities. The educational, health and poverty gap was enormous, what could be done to lessen and minimise the impact and what programmes could be put in place. The Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education responded that schools had been working with families continuously throughout the pandemic and thus experienced to address any arising problem. There was always

learning to capitalise on to be ahead. In terms of disproportionality issues, this had been heightened since Child Q, and comments raised had been acknowledged. A lot of the work had made attempts to address the issue which was a challenge as the aim was to be ahead instead of reacting to an issue, and that a contingency was in place for what was to come. The Cabinet Member added that children had often said 'nobody cares', although unbeknown to them were people in higher position who would stand up for them, and thus for children, families and young people to see that people were held to account would help see the work and change in place.

A Member had asked a question in relation to the decline in numbers of children coming into the system, falling school rolls and schools with vacant places. There was a worry that schools were kept open or that there were too many vacancies, and this was not being addressed. The Cabinet Member responded that this shared concern had been a focus in discussions and highlighted that it was difficult to reduce the number of school places when the numbers of children in Croydon continue to increase. The Director of Education added that this focus had seen briefings shared at Cabinet meeting which looked at options, and there had also been discussion with schools to support in decision making. It was also noted that this issue was national and not just a Croydon issue.

A Member had made a comment addressing that a child should be legally represented on life impact situations in relation to losing education. The Cabinet Member responded addressing the importance of having an appropriate adult and how support young people were supported. Though it was difficult to always have legal representation, it was acknowledged that children and families would benefit from strengthened provision that gave them a voice and having someone to liaise on their behalf, in addition to making families aware of support at an earliest time.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Learning thanked the Sub-Committee for the last four years in addressing the challenges and reflection in a firm and robust scrutiny, which had welcomed growth within her role. Benefits of constructive challenges had been welcomed by the Sub-committee and the openness and challenges were also applauded. This had set better support to making a difference to children's lives.

25/22 What Difference has this Meeting made to Croydon's Children

The Sub-Committee reflected over the last four years highlighting the leadership of the Chair and Vice-Chair in their roles to sustain scrutiny in Children, Young People and Learning following the Ofsted report in 2018 – which helped monitor the performances in Children's Services.

The Sub-Committee reflected on the covid-19, budgets, and serious case reviews where they challenged services and officers in account for improved services for the borough.

The Sub-Committee highlighted the difficulties experienced throughout the years which helped shaped genuine engagement.

The Sub-Committee had been purposeful to hear from a diverse group and the challenges had been very good.

The Sub-Committee welcomed hearing the voice of young children was great through visits and to foresee future engagement in this area.

The Sub-Committee welcomed new topics for the new Sub-Committee to review.

The meeting ended at 9.23 pm

Signed:

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Date:

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