

Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee

Meeting of held on Tuesday, 28 November 2017 at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall,
Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Jan Buttinger (Chair);
Councillor Sean Fitzsimons (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Sue Bennett, Margaret Bird, Patricia Hay-Justice, Maddie Henson,
Bernadette Khan and Andrew Rendle

Also Present: Councillor Alisa Flemming

Apologies: Councillor Maria Gatland

PART A

40/17 **Apologies for absence**

Apologies were given by Councillor Maria Gatland (represented by Cllr Margaret Bird at this meeting), Dave Harvey and Elaine Jones.

41/17 **Minutes of the previous sub-committee meeting**

The minutes were agreed.

RESOLVED THAT: the minutes of the meeting held on 17 October 2017 be signed as a correct record.

42/17 **Disclosures of interest**

There were none.

43/17 **Urgent Business (if any)**

There were none.

44/17 **The Annual Report of the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board**

Di Smith, Interim Independent Chair of Croydon Safeguarding Children Board, was in attendance for this item. She explained that she was an experienced Director of Children's Services, and that she had extensive experience of working on children's services improvement plans with various councils.

Di Smith explained that the Annual Report of the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board predated the recent Ofsted inspection of children's services,

in which the annual report had been found not to be fit for purpose. It had been criticised for its lack of evidence and evaluative rigour.

The covering report produced by Di Smith sought to emphasise current activity and progress in improving children's services. A key objective of the Croydon Safeguarding Children's Board will be to develop effective partnership work between the council, the police and health service providers and a steering group bringing together representatives of each of these authorities has been created to take this work forward. In addition, a development day bringing together key stakeholders was recently held, in which all present acknowledged the safeguarding partnership had failed and that measures had to be taken to ensure that children's safeguarding became more effective. Partners worked on prioritisation, ways of evidencing respectful challenge and of achieving "effective impact" as urged by Ofsted.

Members were advised that improvements would need to follow the latest government guidance on "Working Together to Safeguard Children".

Members asked how partners would balance action and statutory reporting responsibilities. They were informed that the priorities set out in the 2016-17 annual report would be maintained and that partners would have to implement the objectives set out in the Ofsted improvement plan. As regards statutory reporting on performance, the Interim Chair acknowledged that this could take up significant amounts of officer time and that this needed to be better balanced with implementation of improvements.

Members asked how they could access agendas and reports of the safeguarding board as they wished to compare new agendas and minutes to documents published before the Ofsted inspection. They had noticed that older agendas had been significantly overloaded and wondered whether this had improved. The Executive Director (People) stated that agendas should usually be published on the web, although this was not always the case. Members were also reminded that the CSCB was *not* a council body and had different publishing procedures. The Interim Chair explained that she would have to work with partners to agree to publish their meeting papers on a regular basis. Members expressed the hope that this could be achieved so that they could monitor the work of the Safeguarding Board and satisfy themselves that its challenging role was becoming more robust.

Members asked for health and police partners to attend future scrutiny meetings focusing on the work of the children's safeguarding board, as their role in this work was critical. They stressed the importance of scrutinising the effectiveness and impact of their partnership work to safeguard children. The Interim Chair stated that she was willing to coordinate the attendance of health and police representatives alongside herself and council officers at future meetings discussing the work of the Safeguarding Children Board.

Members asked how the structure of the safeguarding board was going to change. They were advised that this had not been finalised and that the board was not yet fully active. Draft proposals should have been drawn up by February

2018, however. Priorities will also need to be agreed and funding identified to implement them.

Members asked whether reserve officers attended safeguarding board meetings if the usual representatives were unable to do so. The Interim Chair undertook to enquire whether this was standard practice. As regards representation from schools, members were advised that their staff agreed among themselves to share out attendance at a wide variety of different networks including the safeguarding board, and to provide feedback on discussions at head teachers' meetings.

Members asked whether the safeguarding board had any representation from special schools. While this was not the case on the main board, members were advised that there was a very active education sub-group in the CSCB, which was regularly attended by about 60-70 school representatives. In addition, Ofsted Improvement Board meetings are attended by primary, secondary and special school representatives.

Members asked who would represent the police on the board and were advised that this had not yet been finalised because of an ongoing reorganisation. The Borough Commander was currently involved in the safeguarding board.

Members asked what the partnership planned to do to improve children's safeguarding. They were advised that the partnership was focusing on developing a multi-agency approach to neglect, and was planning to adopt a tool developed by the NSPCC to do this work. The partnership was also reviewing serious case reviews carried out in the last two years to identify learning points and include them in the improvement plan developed after this summer's Ofsted inspection. Members welcomed this approach and asked that officers should evidence how lessons had been learnt and applied to improve children's safeguarding procedures and practice.

Asked to provide further information regarding the tool developed by the NSPCC, officers explained that this resource, which helps social workers with their decision-making, was called "Graded Care Profile 2" and had been identified through the activity of a Task and Finish group focusing on tackling the needs of neglected children. Three teams have volunteered to pilot the new tool and five "champions" are being trained to train teams to use it, with a view to rolling out the tool to 500 practitioners.

Members informed the Interim Chair that they had previously been prevented by officers from observing Safeguarding Board meetings. They asked for these hurdles to be tackled so that they could monitor the activity of the Safeguarding Board and familiarise themselves with its work.

Members highlighted a number of projects which had been implemented in past years to provide improved support to troubled families and children, such as the Strengthening Families programme, the Troubled Families programme and the social work academy. They asked what these initiatives

had achieved and whether any lessons had been learnt and implemented. Keen to ascertain whether there had been continuity of learning and understanding from these initiatives, they urged officers to find and share information on them.

The Interim Independent Chair of Croydon Safeguarding Children Board was thanked for her answers to members' questions.

Resolved that:

- health and police partners be invited to the next meeting scrutinising the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board
- Information be obtained on the achievements and lessons learnt from the Strengthening Families programme, the Troubled Families programme and the social work academy, to be enshrined in future good practice

45/17 **Statistics on missing children**

The following officers were in attendance for this item:

- Barbara Peacock Executive Director (People)
- Philip Segurola, Interim Director, Early Help and Children's Social Care

The Interim Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care gave an overview of the statistics on missing children and percentage of Return Home Interviews (RHIs) carried out from April 2017 onwards. He stated that the performance of completed RHIs was improving but still needed to improve considerably.

Members were advised that additional staffing had been recruited to carry out RHIs. Their background is in improving family resilience and their focus is on completing these interviews with high risk adolescents on the edge of care. Staff are holding daily meetings to discuss missing children and agree ways of tackling the issues causing these absences. Officers added that the organisation commissioned to organise out of borough placements for children in care would be asked to organise RHIs for any such young person going missing, within 72 hours of their return home.

Members welcomed the report. However, they asked for future reports on RHIs to provide not only percentages, but also numbers of RHIs completed.

Asked about the age of children and young people going missing, officers explained that the vast majority were adolescents, with a significant number in the 15-16 year age band.

Members expressed concerns about the possibility of young girls going missing because they were being abused sexually at home. Officers concurred that home circumstances could be the cause of young people going missing. The job of staff carrying out RHIs was to develop a good rapport with the young person being interviewed so that this information could be drawn out of them and solutions developed to tackle abuse.

Asked about the motivation of young people going missing, officers stated that they did so for a wide variety of reasons. One particularly worrying trend, called “county lines”, is that of young people being groomed to sell drugs a considerable distance away from their home town, making it very difficult for local services to combat this practice. Members were also advised of a rise in the number of girls being recruited to get involved in county lines.

Members highlighted the fact that there existed specialist charities focusing on providing support to children in care. Officers concurred, citing “Safer in London” among other voluntary sector organisations carrying out such work.

Officers observed that there was no national benchmark for RHIs but stated that they were committed to raising the percentage of RHIs to 50% of missing episodes.

Members heard that “Achieving for Children”, an organisation working in Kingston and Richmond, usually achieved a 60-65% response rate, which members challenged the council to aspire to. Officers were asked whether they used a range of different ways of contacting young people to conduct RHIs, such as Skype calls. Officers replied that face to face contact was preferable but that officers were flexible in their approach to young people coming back from a missing episode.

It was suggested that the new head of service and an officer who conducts RHIs should be invited to the next meeting of the sub-committee, at which a further update on missing children and RHIs would be considered. Members also asked to receive a sample of the types of questions asked at these interviews.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Learning also encouraged the members of the sub-committee to attend a training event on Wednesday 6 December, illustrating the journey of a young person through the council’s children’s services.

A member of the sub-committee shared experiences of a recent conversation with social workers. They had told her that they had a very heavy caseload, which included significant amounts of administration. They had told their managers that their workload was unmanageable but felt that they had not been listened to. These officers had welcomed the outcome of the Ofsted inspection, which reiterated the concerns they had previously shared with their managers.

Members highlighted the safeguarding risks faced by families and young people placed in Bed and Breakfast. They expressed concerns about the fact that no policies appeared to be in place to safeguard the welfare of the young people concerned. They asked to be provided with information on the training provided to staff working in such establishments, where some very vulnerable people were temporarily housed.

Officers were thanked for their answers to Members' questions and Members agreed to have updates on missing children at both the February and March meetings of the sub-committee.

RESOLVED:

- 1) to note the report
- 2) to receive update reports on missing children and RHIs at the February and March meetings of the sub-committee
- 3) to invite the new head of service and an officer conducting Return Home Interviews to the February meeting of the sub-committee
- 4) to receive information on safeguarding provision and training at Bed and Breakfast establishments

46/17 **Use of pre-birth assessment and legal planning to support early permanency decision making**

Members were given an outline of this topic by officers. They stressed that each meeting of the sub-committee needed to have an item on the progress of the improvement plan, which officers committed themselves to providing.

Officers emphasised that Public Law Outline (PLO) was a critical part of the process for protecting vulnerable babies and children and yet had not been valued or used to the full by children's services. They explained that PLO had two benefits:

- It entailed all the preparation work being completed ahead of court appearances, thus avoiding delays
- The application process itself can be a wake-up call for families and present an opportunity to acknowledge problems and put things right

The Council had previously carried out poor preparation for PLO cases, leading to difficulties during court cases and harming the relationship between the council and the court.

Following the Ofsted inspection, PLOs have become a priority. The number of care proceedings has increased significantly: 92 have been issued in the first five and a half of this financial year. Officers observed that pre-birth has been a factor in many of the referrals. This rise in the number of cases has presented a major challenge for resources, as a result of which two new teams have been created and a third one is now being recruited to.

Officers highlighted the fact that support for children was often hampered by the fact that information on their histories was often unavailable or of poor quality as the families concerned tended to move from borough to borough and information sharing from one council to another was an issue.

Officers explained that social workers dealing with such cases were being trained on court processes and trials to feel more confident when presenting a case. Members asked whether they could observe this training.

Members enquired why the council was having to deal with such high numbers of cases and asked whether parenting skills training could be provided to prevent problems from emerging in the first place. The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Learning suggested that such support or training could be provided through the means of community engagement. Members agreed that this needed to be prioritised as prevention was far better than cure.

Officers were thanked for their responses to members' questions.

RESOLVED to note the report.

47/17 **Work Programme Report**

Members discussed the work programme for the 6 February and 13 March 2018 sub-committee meetings. They agreed to have follow-up items on missing children and Return Home Interviews and on the Ofsted improvement plan at the February and March 2018 meetings.

Members discussed what difference had been made as a result of scrutiny work. Officers highlighted the usefulness of members' questioning on safeguarding in Bed and Breakfast establishments and their challenge to the Interim Chair of the CSCB regarding the representation of staff teaching disabled children on the safeguarding board. The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Learning stated that she had particularly valued the following:

- the sub-committee's questions on missing children and RHIs
- the discussions held by members with social workers, revealing their concerns over heavy workloads and management's lack of response to these concerns
- the sub-committee's request to engage parents and help them acquire better parenting skills to nip children's problems in the bud.

Members asked officers to provide them with the protocol for police action in schools. Officers acknowledged that such a protocol existed, and was due to be reissued in January 2018. They undertook to have it circulated to members of the sub-committee and to invite comment from them on its content. It was suggested that there was a need for a community group to monitor cases where young people were arrested by the police to ensure compliance with the protocol.

Members asked to receive the report which is to be written by the children's commissioner on her findings about the council's progress on implementing its improvement plan.

RESOLVED to:

- (i) have an agenda item on missing children and RHIs at both the February and March sub-committee meetings
- (ii) consider an agenda item on progress with the Ofsted Improvement Plan at both the February and March sub-committee meetings

- (iii) request a copy of the protocol for police action in schools
- (iv) request a copy of the report to be written by the children's commissioner on her findings regarding the council's progress on implementing its improvement plan.

The meeting ended at 8.45 pm

Signed:

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Date:

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