

Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee

Meeting of held on Tuesday, 23 June 2020 at 6.30 pm in This meeting is being held remotely; to view the meeting, please click here

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Robert Ward (Chair);
Councillor Sean Fitzsimons (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Sue Bennett, Mary Croos, Jerry Fitzpatrick, Bernadette Khan,
Gareth Streeter and Callton Young

Co-optee Members

Mr Dave Harvey (Non-voting Teacher representative), Geoff Hopper (Voting Parent Governor Representative) and Paul O'Donnell (Voting Parent Governor Representative)

Also Present: Robert Henderson – Executive Director, Children Young People and Education
Kerry Crichlow, Programme Director Children's Improvement Journey
Shelley Davies, Interim Director of Education
Sarah Warman, Director of Commissioning and Procurement
Pasquale Brammer, Head of Commissioning and Procurement
Karen Stott, Director Off the Record
Gordon Knott, Director Croydon Drop In
Harold Bennison, CAMHS Service Director, SLAM NHS FT
Josephine Copeland, Headteacher All Saints School

Apologies: Elaine Jones

PART A

22/20 Apologies for absence

Apologies received from Elaine Jones.

23/20 Minutes of the previous sub-committee meeting

The minutes of the meeting on 3 March 2020 were agreed as an accurate record.

24/20 Disclosures of interest

There were no disclosures of interest.

25/20 Urgent Business (if any)

There were none.

26/20 Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Service (Formerly CAMHS)

The Head of Commissioning and Procurement introduced the item and advised that the presentation would be taken in three sections by the guests invited to the meeting to represent organisations that provided well-being services to vulnerable young people in the borough.

The Director of Off the Record presented her organisations response and the following was highlighted:

- Initially all face to face contact was suspended during lockdown and following reconfiguration, services were had resumed using remote means of access
- There had been an initial decrease in self referrals which had now increased with referrals for online counselling services doubling.
- Young carer's services had been prioritised during the pandemic due to distinct vulnerabilities of this group.
- Regular telephone contact was maintained with young refugees.
- The service was redesigned as staying in touch was important for young people. Looking ahead the service would retain some of the online service as it had been vital in maintaining contact with young people

The Director of Croydon Drop-in presented and the following was noted:

- All intervention services had moved online with staff and young people adapting well which meant resources were being utilised effectively.
- Clinical supervision of staff remained the same and a staff self-care group had been set up on WhatsApp for regular contact.
- Due to the use of online resources the service had been able to maintain more contact with parents and guardians
- Ongoing counselling support has been maintained

The Service Director of CAMHS, SLAM NHS presented and the following was highlighted:

- The service continued to maintain some face to face interactions, including crisis care and in-patient services. In response to the pandemic and lockdown, the crisis telephone line was expanded.
- There had been a decrease in the number of referrals received in the initial stages of the lockdown, this had been steadily increasing following the lifting of restrictions.
- The service experienced an increase in in-patient admissions and crisis calls
- Reset strategy in place and set within national context with remote working continuing to be the standard way of working where possible.

Following the presentations, the sub-committee was able to ask officers questions.

A Member asked how the Croydon Drop-in was prepared for future ways of working. The officer responded that they would continue to utilise and invest in technology. Staff had undertaken additional training which had increased skills among the workforce. They would offer face to face contact where possible, but the reality was that an increased level of remote contact would continue to take place.

It was further asked if any children had lost out on support as a result of restrictions and what checks were being undertaken to identify children that had been disadvantaged. Officers acknowledged that in the beginning of lockdown there has been a decrease in referral, with colleagues asked to be cautious of referring. In particular there had been a decrease in referrals for autism assessments through CAMHS due to the face to face interaction required for assessments which would not be undertaken. Referrals are now open to be received as normal and priority would be given to face to face assessments where necessary. Referrers had been tasked with taking the lead to identify children and young people that had been adversely disadvantaged. Good communication had been maintained with schools who were being proactive in identifying any gaps in provision.

Additional questions were raised on issues that may have transpired within GP services and officers responded that they had met regularly with clinical leads and provided regular communication. In terms of referrals and access to support, the SPOC played a vital role in multiagency co-ordination and response.

Officers were challenged on how they ensured equalities of access to services and how confident they were that no particular group had been disadvantaged. They acknowledged that improvements could have been made in equality of access, in particular there was an under representation of BME groups accessing services during the height of lockdown. Additionally Looked After Children (LAC) services also needed increased focus and priority. One of the areas that was being utilised going forward was the emphasis on digital connectivity and understanding the impact that it could have on improving access for all.

A Member asked whether the review of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) assessment would include engagement with stakeholders, including the Autism Partnership Board. Officers said that as part of the review of ASD and pathways to assessment and support, consideration was being given to the ongoing work that cuts across all partnerships. They would also like to engage with appropriate community forums and would like to discuss this in detail after the meeting to ensure they were liaising with the right people.

A further question was raised on how parents could fast track consultation with specialists in respect of medication issues to ensure that substantial

delays in medication review could be highlighted. Officers said that all children receiving medication have had regular check-ins during the pandemic with prescribing doctors and nurses being proactive in ensuring medication was sent by post under the national special agreement on distribution of medication. There may have been delays for children that had not had appointments and assessments to determine if medication was an option as part of their treatment. Regular telephone reviews had been taking place but there had been difficulties experienced due to the inability to meet face to face. There was a duty line in place and parents were being encouraged to use the line to discuss any concerns or issues.

A member commented that it was important that services used the opportunity presented to explore new ways to deliver and improve long term practice and asked how the roles of schools in accessing support for children and young people has changed and what lessons had been learnt.

Officers said that contact with schools had improved, with increased links between therapists and schools. The education support teams and practitioners had been integral to the provision of virtual programmes and as a result there was the ability to offer workshops over the summer holidays for year six children due to concerns about their transition. The head teacher of All Saints School said that they had been working with officers and had been provided with increased support and communication during the period. It was important that foundation work at a primary school level in accessing services in particular through virtual means continued.

The Chair thanked officers and guests for their attendance and engagement with the sub-committee and commented on the emerging positive consequences of the pandemic. The importance of building on Scrutiny interaction with CAMHS and voluntary services was re-confirmed, with reference made to a future joint meeting to be held between this sub-committee and the Scrutiny Health and Social Care committee to delve further into mental health service provision for children and young people.

In reaching its recommendations, the sub-committee came to the following **CONCLUSIONS:**

1. The continued dedication and commitment to supporting, improving and promoting the wellbeing of children and young people during these unprecedented times was commendable.
2. It was clear that there remained distinct issues with Autism diagnoses and that a focus towards addressing these issues must remain a priority
3. The commitment by the Head of Croydon's Children's Commissioning and Procurement service to involving stakeholders in the review of Autism diagnosis and support pathways was welcomed
4. The Voluntary Community Services were to be commended for their ability to be innovative and adapt their digital services through the provision of online services to enable young people to access services. The discussion on the potential extension of this innovative and positive way of service delivery was welcomed.

5. The recognition of the need for building foundational services for early years and primary school age children to provide support for mental health and emotional wellbeing was commended.
6. The importance of partnership working to deliver transformation and effect change was essential and must be supported.
7. The provision and availability of easy contact to the emergency duty team for parents and families was encouraging.
8. The opportunity for Members to conduct visits and support services in any capacity was welcomed.

The sub-committee **RESOLVED** to recommend:

1. That more work be done on equality and diversity of access to services and the commitment made by the Head of Commissioning and Procurement be endorsed.
2. That the Sub-Committee be kept updated on the progress of reviews, including the conclusions and outcomes as well as lessons learnt.
3. That the Voluntary Community Services (VCS) continue to explore ways of using social media and technology to improve their service and be a champion in this area in order that other organisations can learn from its practices.

27/20 Children's Improvement Plan Update

The Executive Director of Children Families and Education presented the report which detailed the draft Children's Improvement Plan 2020/21, which had been revised following the outcome of the Ofsted standard ILACS inspection of Early Help and Children's Social Care.

The outcome of the re-inspection in February 2020 resulted in a Good Judgement for Croydon's Children's Services, with the Publication of the Ofsted letter in March 2020 which detailed the dramatic improvements that had been made since the last inspection in 2017.

The transformation of the service through strong leadership both corporate and political and the investment in exceptional senior staff and social workers was commended.

There were areas highlighted as still requiring improvement with four recommendations made in the following areas:

- The quality of written plans for children in need, children in care and care leavers.
- Services provided to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds.
- Services for care leavers, particularly the range of suitable accommodation, responses to emotional health needs and preparation for independence.
- Placement sufficiency for children in care, and accommodation for care leavers.

As a result, the Improvement plan had been refreshed with actions to address these recommendations. The final plan would be presented to Cabinet in July 2020.

The Sub-Committee was given the opportunity to ask questions on the content of the report.

A Member challenged that success measures needed to be 'smarter' with metrics to enable the measurement and benchmarking of performance. It was felt that the current process did not enable the robust measurement of progress made. Officers acknowledged this and advised that an action plan was being drawn up which would address these concerns including a dashboard of metrics which would be sent to Ofsted and could be shared with the Sub-Committee.

A Member highlighted that the lack of up to date information on KPI dashboards had hampered the effectiveness of Scrutiny as well as impacting upon the enablement of the digital aspects of the service moving forward at pace. Officers agreed that in the past this had been an issue and made reference to the fact that this had now improved, as there was now performance rich data available as a result of the extensive work carried out by the Programme Director for the improvement journey as well as the Performance Team. It was agreed that some data was not available in real time in particular when relying on regional or national data.

It was asked how the improvement in social work practice and morale as referenced in the Ofsted report was being used in the recruitment of practitioners. Officers said that improvement in this area had been excellent for staff and Croydon's reputation, which was getting stronger, will attract more staff. There has been a lot of work carried out using social media and networking opportunities to recruit good social workers. A successful international recruitment drive had taken place and 23 social workers from South Africa would arrive in September and October.

It was further questioned how exact the 20% average agency vacancy rate for social workers across London was, with officers confirming that this was an estimate as some borough had better rates than others, in particular those local authorities with Good and Outstanding ratings. Some inner London boroughs had better vacancy rates due to pay resources and low caseloads. Croydon's plan to tackle its own issues was to invest in the growth of our newly qualified social workers by supporting and nurturing them to retain them in the borough over the long term.

A Member asked what measures would be taken to improve outcomes and services for looked after children and care leavers as this was an area highlighted by Ofsted as required improvement. Officers maintained that they were committed to the delivery of best quality service for care leavers and it was acknowledged that there had not been enough progress made to improve outcomes. There was focused work taking place on the development of a

Care Leavers Pledge, the final review of the offer had been completed and papers would be submitted to Cabinet in July 2020.

It was asked what action had been being taken to communicate the needs of children who were in out of borough placements to their host boroughs, and the impact of the team that had been assigned to have oversight of this activity. Officers said that the post was yet to be recruited and they were working to get someone in post as quickly as possible. It was acknowledged that there had been a nationwide historic history of issues with handovers and poor risk assessments associated with out of borough placements. The department was working to fill the post as quickly as possible to ensure there was improvement in the tracking of children placed in and out of Croydon.

The Chair thanked officers for their responses to questions.

In reaching its recommendations, the sub-committee came to the following

CONCLUSIONS:

1. The efforts of the whole department in improving, effecting change and the transformation of the service which resulted in the Ofsted rating was acclaimed and should be celebrated.
2. The continued efforts in reducing the use of agency staff was positive and the service was to be commended on the recruitment drive, in particular the international recruitment of 23 social workers to the service.
3. The commitment to recruiting and developing newly qualified social workers was a welcomed positive enterprise that would serve the borough in years to come.
4. The issues with shortages of social workers was recognised as a national one that required continued cross party support in lobbying government for increased funding for the sector.
5. There continued to be issues with the provision of smart data for analysis to the Sub-Committee.
6. The Sub-Committee was encouraged by the plans to recruit an officer to track and ensure information was shared about children placed in and out of the borough.
7. The importance of a quantifiable and measurable means of success was highlighted, in order to gain a full understanding of the journey of the service.

The Sub-Committee **RESOLVED** to recommend:

1. That in line with new governance structures, smart metrics and live data be provided to the Sub-Committee in order to enable the effectiveness of success where appropriate.
2. That the Chair and the Executive Director of Children's Services work together to determine the key types of data that should be brought before the Committee.
3. That the Streets Environment and Scrutiny Sub-Committee work with the relevant senior officers and Cabinet Members to scrutinise the physical and environmental barriers that contribute to the recruitment and retention of social workers to Croydon.

28/20 Children's services response to COVID 19

The Director for Early Help and Children's Social Care presented the report which detailed the Council's response to the Covid 19 crisis and the support in place for vulnerable children. The following was highlighted:

- There had been a reduction in referrals during lockdown and in the first week post lockdown, there has been an increase which coincided with more children attending school. It was anticipated that there would be further increases for which the department was prepared.
- Social workers had continued to conduct face to face visits where appropriate during lockdown, using PPE and conducting risk assessments prior to visits.
- One of the advantages and points of learning to working virtually was the increased and improved communication with families. The ability to engage through social media has allowed young people to engage in ways that had not been done before.

The Interim Director of Education provided the following highlights:

- Partners had worked collaboratively to co-ordinate their response.
- PPE starter packs were supplied to schools and special schools.
- The welfare of children and families was at the fore front of the response by ensuring the provision of food for vulnerable families and those in receipt of free school meals.
- During lockdown there were 300 children in attendance at schools in the borough, this had now increased significantly.
- Priority was now to plan ahead for full school reopening in September 2020, with targeted provision and support due to the length of period children have not been able to attend school.
- The Service was working with Public Health on posters and leaflets for schools and parents on how to keep children safe, recognising and reporting symptoms. Transition guidance was also in productions for schools.
- The greatest concern was children that had not been able to access education for a number of reasons and being able to support them back into school. Mental health and the wellbeing of pupils would be a priority as well and bridging attainment gaps.

The Head Teacher of All Saints Schools conveyed that communication from the Council had been good, with the regular contact through the school's link officers encouraging. The localities aspect of children's services had worked well in promoting cohesiveness as it allowed for regular meetings between schools in the same demographics to share learning.

Officers and schools were commended and thanked for all their hard work during this difficult time.

Following presentations, the Sub-Committee was given the opportunity to raise questions.

A Member asked how the reporting of safeguarding concerns to the SPOC had been made during this period when vulnerable children were not coming in to contact with services that would usually refer them. Officers said that it was of great concern that there were children that would have experienced hardship during this period. As the pandemic was moving into a recovery period, core services were coming into increasing contact with children, leading to improved line of visibility with the needs of children responded to appropriately.

A question was raised on how the needs of children with Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) plans, whose risk assessments had not been returned or addressed. Officers said that since the report was written, there had been an increase in returned risks assessments. There was a concern about the level of risk assessments received from independent schools and this was being followed up. It was important to note that some Local Authorities had taken the decision not to have oversight of risks assessments but Croydon had, as they wanted to ensure that schools understood that the risk assessment should be treated as a working document. It was also important that the terminology be clear and simple to understand.

It was important to note that conversations were taking place with maintained schools to widen provision for Special Educational Needs (SEN) and EHCP children and there was confidence that schools were able to keep children safe and had been following guidance. The local offer has been updated and a newsletter was being produced that would be sent to families and community advising on what support was available and how to access it.

A Member asked what support had been offered to schools in dealing with the Free School Meals issue prior to the introduction of the National Voucher Scheme. Officers said that guidance had been created and sent by the schools food officer which detailed how to access support, with an email address provided for schools to refer any families experiencing food poverty. Even with the National Voucher Scheme in place, schools, youth zones and voluntary organisations continued to offer food parcels and not just for families in receipt of free school meals, but any family who had experienced food poverty.

A question was raised on the laptop scheme about how many children were eligible and had received a device. Officers said that laptops had been allocated for children with social workers, the first 100 had arrived and were being distributed. The local authority had asked for more than they were told they could receive and have had to wait for them. Some schools made provision where possible and commissioned laptops for families that they knew were in need.

Concern was raised about the announcement by government of the withdrawal of free travel for under 18's and the impact this policy change would have on young people in the borough. Officers echoed the concerns, highlighting the impact this could have on attendance levels. The criteria set by the government was that children in receipt of free school meals would be eligible for free travel and the Council had put a process in place to identify all children that were eligible. It was acknowledged that this was a big challenge that would require London wide co-ordination.

A Member highlighted that risk assessments were compiled by individual schools and whilst there had been evidence of some excellent risk assessments, it was suggested that a template should have been produced by the local authority. Officers said that a comprehensive checklist was provided for schools on areas of focus in drawing up their risk assessments. The Head Teacher of the All Saints School added that it was important that schools were given the opportunity to build and tailor their own risk assessments to the individual needs of the school. Through locality meetings there was the opportunity to share experience which had indicated that whilst their templates were different, there was consistency in the content.

A further question was raised on individual risk assessments and how they were being managed. Officers said that whilst not all schools were conducting individual risk assessments, plans had been put in place to reduce transmission with the aim of keeping children as well as adults safe. Head teachers were tasked with ensuring that the mental health of their staff was a priority along with the development of a delivery mechanism for education for those that were shielding.

A question was raised on legal planning and court applications, as due to lockdown there would be a backlog of hearings, and what the implications would be. Officers said that there had not been an increase in court applications prior to the lockdown. There were 6 legal planning meetings each week and this had remained consistent with the department working to only issue these for permanent or alternative care instances. The number of applications had not significantly risen due to the sustained effort over the past 18 months. Further information on this was agreed to be provided to the Sub-Committee following the meeting.

A Member suggested that as part of the Education Directorate Covid-19 Transition Action Plan, consideration be given to addressing two emerging issues. The disproportionate impact on BME staff of the Covid-19 pandemic and discussions to be held on how the national curriculum could be enriched with black history. It was further suggested that the Education Directorate engage in conversations with colleagues that were looking at ways to develop this offer. Officers took on board the suggestions made and advised that further discussions would take place on the matters raised.

Officers were thanked for their engagement and responses to questions.

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

1. Officers were thanked and extended encouragement for their work and efforts in response to the challenges that had arisen as a result of the Covid-19 crisis.
2. The initiative and collaboration shown by schools to provide extended support to one another and to families identified as vulnerable and in need was commendable and should continue to be developed.
3. The timeliness of advice from the Council to schools was discussed in the meeting, subsequent investigations found that timely guidance had been provided.
4. The steps being taken as a results of emerging conversations from the Localities meetings which has resulted in proposed meetings of heads of schools to discuss the development of the curriculum to include black history was welcomed.
5. There were concerns that a fair system for assessing eligibility of free travel would not realistically be developed by September 2020 due to complexities involved

The Sub-Committee **RESOLVED** to recommend:

1. To the Mayor of London, Chair of London Councils, Leader of Croydon Council, Cabinet Member for Transport and the Secretary of State the concerns and implications regarding the withdrawal of free school travel for all children. Additionally the logistical issues local authorities would be presented with in implementing an eligibility system within the expected timeframe should be highlighted.
2. That officers explore in detail in advance of reopening of schools in September, how to ensure that children that experienced neglect during this crisis period can be appropriately supported. Additionally what can be done in the future to ensure that these children can be identified in the event usual mechanisms of detection are compromised
3. That an addition be made to the action plan to work together to explore how to facilitate an initiative for the enrichment of the school curriculum with black history.
4. That consideration be given to the emerging issue of the impact of disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on BAME staff.

Information requests by the sub-committee

1. Data on take up of bereavement service during this period
2. Data on the number of children for whom Croydon holds a public law order including numbers of children with s47.
3. The Committee requests the provision of comparative information for April and May in 2018, 2019 and 2020 relating to legal planning meetings, number of applications made pursuant to s.31 of the Children Act 1989 and investigations undertaken pursuant to s.47 of that Act

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29/20 What difference has this meeting made to Croydon's children

The Sub-Committee welcomed the opportunity to delve into the details of the Council's response to Children's care and Educational needs which had been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 emergency and imposition of lock down restrictions. It was agreed that this would continue to be a priority area of scrutiny for the coming months.

30/20 Work Programme 2020/21

It was confirmed that that meeting of 17 September 2020 would include the following agenda items:

- Children's Social Care Dashboards
- Update on Covid 19 response
- Update on Education Health and Care Plans

The meeting ended at 9.47 pm

Signed:

Date: