

Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee

Meeting of held on Tuesday, 15 September 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 Jerry Fitzpatrick, Bernadette Khan and Gareth Streeter

Co-optee Members

Mr Leo Morrell (Voting Diocesan Representative), Ms Elaine Jones (Voting Diocesan Representative (Catholic Diocese)), Geoff Hopper (Voting Parent Governor Representative) and Paul O'Donnell (Voting Parent Governor Representative)

Also Present: Councillor Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children Families and Education.
Nick Pendry, Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care
Kerry Crichlow, Programme Director, Children's Improvement
Shelley Davies, Interim Director of Education
Michael McKeaveney, Interim Head of Education Standards, Quality and Inclusion.

Apologies: Councillor Jamie Audsley, Sue Bennett and Callton Young

PART A

31/20 Apologies for absence

Apologies received from Councillors Jamie Audsley, Sue Bennett, and Callton Young.

Apologies received from Dave Harvey who confirmed that his term on the Sub-Committee had ended and that the teacher union's joint committee has nominated Josephine Copeland as the teacher representative on Scrutiny.

32/20 Disclosures of interest

There were no disclosures of interest

33/20 Urgent Business (if any)

34/20 Action list update

The Chair provided a brief update on the action list and it was noted that all priority actions were up to date. There were a small number of rolling actions which remained opened and would be resolved as soon as possible.

35/20 Update Report: Early Help and Children's Social Care

The Director for Early Help and Children's Social Care presented the report and the following was noted:

- Contacts had reduced over the lockdown period, this had now begun to rise with August figures in line with numbers experienced before lockdown. Referrals had increased but not spiked.
- There were concerns in managing some of the challenges experienced by families which had not come to light due to children not being in sight of services such as schools and addressing these was priority for services.
- The issues experienced by Kent County Council have had a London wide impact.
- In order to sustain service improvement a quality assurance framework was implemented to enable senior management to retain focus on practice.
- There had been a reduction in the number of heads of service, with those remaining in post continuing to work to deliver improvements.
- One of the strengths of the department was its systemic practice, which included a successful bid for the social workers in schools project, the impact of which was expected to be extensive.
- Work continued to address the impact of Covid 19, in particular on the mental health and wellbeing of children.
- A focus visit was expected from Ofsted in the autumn. This was due to various reasons including the Council's financial challenge, the resignation of the Executive Director and incidents that had occurred since the inspection.

Following the presentation, the Chair and the Sub-Committee thanked officers for all the work they had done in serving the needs of Croydon's children, and in particular recognised the role of Robert Henderson as well as Nick Pendry in bringing the service forward and driving improved standards of professionalism.

A Member questioned how the department was managing the difficulties of protecting children at serious risk during the lockdown period. Officers said that as soon as the lockdown had been announced they reassessed all Child Protection (CP) and Child in Need (CIN) cases and appointed priority numbers. All Priority 1 children continued to have direct visits from social workers in full PPE and officers were confident in ensuring the safety of the most vulnerable children identified. There was reasonable confidence that the safety of children on CIN plans was maintained as best as possible, although visits for those children could only be maintained through virtual means. The

risk was that these children may have become more at risk during the Covid period and this may not have been identified due to a lack of face to face visits. There had been a spike since the end of lock down in referrals of adolescent children due to the impact of issues as a result of Covid.

Additionally since the end of restrictions there had been an increase in gang activity, exploitation of adolescents and knife crime which had not been present during the lockdown period.

It was asked how the department was securing permanent placements for the considerable number of children ordered by the courts and with children awaiting adoption. Officers advised that there had been some delays, in particular with introductions to prospective adopters, which normally take a number of staggered close visits, long term foster carers and special guardianship. There had also been delays experienced in the recruitment of potential adopters and the recruitment of foster carers had slowed due to the lockdown. The Permanence team was working to get back on track to ensure that any delays in seeking the right placements for children were minimised.

A Member asked when the project for social workers to be based in schools would commence. Officers responded that this project was currently in the recruitment stage, with funding for eight social workers secured through a Department for Education pilot. It was envisaged that all posts would be recruited to by October. The purpose of the pilot was to reduce the number of contacts through the SPOC.

In light of the Council's current financial challenges, it was questioned whether there would be capacity within the service to deal with spikes in referrals, as experienced during the Covid recovery. Officers confirmed there was built in capacity to manage any consequences. There was an agreed plan in place in the event of acute spike to recruit additional agency social workers. The financial position was not extended to the delivery of statutory services and there had been assurance from the Council's leadership that needs would be met.

A Member commented that one of the threats mentioned on page eight of the report was the continued child protection work in Croydon and officers were asked to elaborate on that statement. Officers replied that the threats alluded to were based on a mixture of a rise in cases and the complexity of issues presented which resulted in issues such as mental health concerns, increased incidences of domestic violence as well as difficulties in managing parenting. All issues would require different levels of intervention and a multi-agency response.

Concerns were raised on the ability of staff to provide services to children in need who may not come to the attention of services during the lockdown period. Officers acknowledged that this was a challenge that may need to be resolved should there be further lockdowns, as there would be an increased risk for vulnerable children without regular contact.

Officers were thanked for their attendance and response to questions

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

Conclusions:

1. The dedication and effort of staff through challenging circumstances was commendable.
2. The Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care provided a positive insight on upcoming challenges and how the department was prepared to manage the difficult times ahead.
3. The complexity of the challenging times ahead was not to be underestimated.
4. Reassurance was needed that there would be flexibility in resources and capacity to meet the needs of families with additional needs in the coming months in light of the expected financial challenge as well as pressures of a second wave of Covid-19.
5. There were still concerns as to how the department would respond to the unknown level of increased risk to Children In Need, in particular adolescents, especially in the event of further lockdown restrictions.
6. The need for urgency in placements for children must remain a priority
7. The news of the funding received from the Department for Education to pilot placements of 8 social workers in schools was praised and a future update on progress and outcome would be welcomed.

The Sub-Committee resolved to **Recommend:**

1. That the department devise a clear plan as to how it will protect the currently unknown number of Children In Need whose behaviour may have escalated, especially in case of further lockdown restrictions.
2. That the Chair of the Children and Young People Sub-Committee write a letter of thanks to staff in children's service for their dedication and hard work.

36/20 Children's Social Care and Education Dashboards

The Chair explained that several meetings had taken place between himself and the Programme Director for the Improvement Journey to finalise what the dashboards should look like and the data required.

The Chair requested a set of diagnostic indicators to be presented at each meeting which would enable Members to be able to identify areas that required in depth discussion and scrutiny. It was suggested that the Sub-Committee use this version for a few months before adding any other parameters.

The Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care presented the Children's social care dashboard report and the following was noted:

- Performance was tracked around a number of areas including LAC, Caseloads, CIN and referrals to Early Help.
- Increase in assessments completed within 44 days

- Since lockdown performance in completion of visits has been assisted by virtual ways of working.
- Face to face visits with children on child protection plans had remained consistent including during the lockdown period and plans have been recorded in line with deadlines.

The Interim Director of Education presented the Education dashboard and the following was noted:

- This was the first time that had created a dashboard and this would be useful in identifying trends and comparisons in areas such as attendance, elective home education and attendance.
- Going forward, elective home education and children missing from education would be included in the dashboard.
- The dashboard would enable regular information to be shared in areas of quality such as a school's Ofsted ratings.

Following presentations, the Sub-Committee took the opportunity to ask questions.

In response to a question on the percentages of cases audited in Children's services and the quality of those audits, Officers said that each round of audits demonstrated that the quality of cases was improving. In the last audit one case was rated as inadequate. More work needed to be done on how the data was presented to the Sub-Committee as reporting on a monthly basis did not provide a true reflection. Further work would be done with the performance team to ensure that statistically accurate data would be presented to Members on a quarterly basis.

Member's sought reassurance that the dashboard format and presentation of data would remain the same to ensure consistency of metrics and comparison to enable appropriate scrutiny and officers agreed to this.

A Member commented that the department was leading in the use of KPIs and performance measures and that this was reassuring, as this has not been the case for a number of years. The Chair was also commended for all his work with officers in pushing forward better access and sharing of information with the Sub-Committee.

It was suggested that the Croydon Digital Service could assist in ensuring that information was transparent and easily assessable to the public as well as Councillors. Additionally that comparative information could be accessed through the LGA Inform. Although Croydon was not a member of LGA Inform it was agreed that it would be beneficial for Councillors and officers to have membership in order to have access to this wealth of data.

Officers were thanked for their responses to questions.

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

1. The reduction of Looked After Children in children's services was positive
2. There was a notable improvement in audit figures which was currently not reflected in the data. Consideration needed to be given to how this was presented, for example quarterly, which would provide a more accurate representation.
3. Future Education dashboards needed to include figures of children missing from education and those in elective home education.
4. It was important that the data presented include comparative information, in particular in SEND in order to form a full picture and aid better understanding of the financial challenge.
5. The Sub-Committee would continue to work together to provide feedback and suggestions on the content of the dashboards.
6. It was important for Councillors to have access to benchmarking tools in order to be able to compare and analyse data and assess performance locally, regionally and nationally.

The Sub-Committee resolved to Recommend:

1. That the next Education dashboard presented include the amount of children split into groups, primary, secondary or college in education in the borough.
2. That the Council make provision for Councillors to have access to LG Inform to enable them to compare and analyse data.
3. That the Chief Digital Officer explore ways of automating dashboards once reporting parameters have been finalised.

37/20 Update on Reopening of Schools following Covid 19 Lockdown

The Interim Director of Education and the Interim Head of Education, Standards Safeguarding and Inclusion presented the report and the following was noted:

- In preparation for re-opening, extensive work had been undertaken including staggered attendances and a multiagency approach on Covid Safety was undertaken by schools to ensure that there was robust measures in place to keep pupils and staff safe.
- Schools worked over the summer to compile publications for parents and guardians on what to do if their children were sick. Schools also had clear guidelines in place on processes to follow in when they had suspected cases of Covid 19.
- Attendance was good on the onset of reopening with some schools at 95% attendance. As schools has now been open for a number of weeks, there had been instances of decline in attendance due to sickness.

- Children had been getting to school using public transport where they have not been able to walk or cycle. There are buses on most routes dedicated for school use only at peak times
- The latest update received from Department for Education (DfE) on the discontinuation of Free School Travel was that it was likely to be delayed until further notice. There was a named person at TFL that the Council could contact to raise any issues or concerns.
- There was a focus on the recovery of the curriculum and a project in place to address any trauma experienced by children. The group met in July and was due to meet again in October, with the work of the project monitored by the Council.
- Overall it had been a positive start to the school year, although it was still the early stages of the academic year, schools and partners were working hard to ensure children, families and staff were all supported and their needs identified.

Following the presentation of the report, Members were given the opportunity to ask questions.

A Member asked a question on what measures were being taken in case of future lockdown measures to support the education of children as a result of school closures, in particular disadvantaged children. Officers said that schools were working to improve their blended learning offer which included virtual learning for children who had to isolate at home to ensure minimum disruption in their education when not able to attend school and learning from the experience of this during the lockdown assisted with preparation.

Concerns were raised about children not having access to equipment when working at home, with it advised that conversations were taking place with regional schools director to address this. Schools were currently reviewing the requirements to deliver blended learning including identifying the families that did not have access to Wi-Fi and how best to support them.

In response to a question on what support was in place to address challenges arising from the physical constraints of school buildings in order to maintain Covid compliance, officers said that schools worked together closely to assist one another during lockdown when there were closures. Now that schools had resumed full time it was more difficult as there should not be instances of children from different schools going into the same bubble. Information was being gathered on cases and the potential impact to build an understanding of any schools disproportionately disadvantaged due to their physical surroundings, with any response provided on a public health basis.

It was asked what the process was for making a decision on whether to shut schools or classes in instances of identified cases. Officers said that schools had to email the Interim Director of Education as well as the Director of Public Health, guidance on what to do must be obtained from the London Coronavirus Response Cell (LCRC) as any cases must be reported to them. There had been instances of delay when trying to get through as it was a national number. Local advice can be given and communication between

schools and the Council has been good but instruction from LCRC must be sought and followed.

In relation to the Recovery Curriculum, it was asked whether head teachers had started work on this. Officers said work had been taking place since the beginning of the summer holidays with the education department providing support to school leaders where appropriate.

Further concern was raised in particular for children reaching the examination age this year due to missed learning. It was agreed this would be a point of discussion for the next meeting as it was a national issue due to pupils missing crucial GCSE and A level education for four months, the impact of which will have to be looked at in more detail.

Concerns were raised on EHCP and it was asked how the completion of statutory assessments had been affected by the constraints of responding to Covid-19. Officers acknowledged that there had been challenges over the period. There had been extensive work with special schools to support families as fewer children with SEN had attended school for a variety of reasons. A curriculum to support home learning was devised and further work was carried out on the Local Offer during lockdown with information sent out to support families. It was agreed that a detailed briefing would be provided to Members following the meeting on the impact.

A question was raised on the financial pressure on schools as a result of Covid, in particular schools already running at a deficit. Officers said this remained a priority and has been raised at national level. The Council will continue to monitor where possible and conversations continued to take place on how to best support schools.

It was asked if there would be a model of provision to support counselling in schools for children. Officers said that the focus was on recovery curriculum and that mental health and well-being was also a point of priority. The Council was working with children in school as part of the Young Londoner Fund work to support their mental health well-being. Comments of the Sub-Committee would be taken on board to use the element of the Grant to support mental health services in schools in the way suggested.

A Member questioned whether the health and safety executive had carried out any inspections nationally to check schools reopening plans and if any lessons had been learnt. Officers said that as far as they were aware, no Croydon schools had received an audit but the Council had received feedback from schools that they had been inspected in terms of the questions that had been asked, in particular engagement with families and how children were able to maintain social distancing. One of the Co-opted Members informed officers that he was aware of a school that had been audited and agreed to discuss this with officers after the meeting to share learning.

It was asked how comfortable the Council was with the procedures to manage any potential outbreaks. Officers said that they were working closely with

public health to scenario plan for any eventualities. There was confidence in schools and the procedures they had in place to manage as effectively as possible

Officers were thanked for their engagement with the Sub-Committee and responses to questions

Information Request

1. Briefing paper of children with SEN & EHCP, update on completion of plans during lockdown and as a result of COVID 19 restrictions

The Sub-Committee came to the following **Conclusions:**

1. The confirmation that the changes to school transport was on hold was welcomed,
2. The confirmation that the department now had a named person at TFL to contact was good progress.
3. There was concern at the development of blended learning plans and the recovery curriculum and what this would look like in different schools.
4. It was important that the Council maintained line of sight on schools that were experiencing financial pressures.
5. The COVID flow chart provided to schools by the Council was commendable.

38/20 Update on Task and Finish Group: Removal from Roll and Off Rolling in Croydon Schools

The Chair of the Task and Finish Group, Councillor Jerry Fitzpatrick gave an update of the trajectory of the review and informed the sub-committee that the final report would be presented in April 2021.

There had been 2 interim reports presented to date. The final report would pull together all the findings and would demonstrate the voice of various sections of the community which had been captured over the course of the review.

39/20 What difference has this meeting made to Croydon's children

- The Sub-Committee had embraced the new way of working, and virtual meetings have gone well including the preparatory meetings that took place which had been very effective.
- The tenacity of Members in requests for information and following up had resulted in data being compiled as requested for the first time.
- Officer engagement and willingness to share information had improved with relationships strengthened as they are taking the committees role more seriously.
- Input and insight of the co-opted members had made a difference to meetings.

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- The Sub-Committee would continue to hold the Council to account on its responsiveness to the needs of the community

40/20 Work programme 2020/21

The Chair confirmed that as well as statutory items for upcoming meetings, the Sub-Committee would continue to focus on Covid 19 response, service and budget impact.

The Chair took the opportunity to thank Councillor Gareth Streeter for all his support and contribution with the Sub-Committee and wished him well in the new roles he had been assigned to.

The meeting ended at 9.20 pm

Signed:

Date:

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