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Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee

Meeting of held on Tuesday, 18 January 2022 at 6.30 pm

This meeting was held remotely and a recording can be viewed on the Council's website

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Robert Ward (Chair), Councillor Sean Fitzsimons (Vice-Chair), Sue Bennett, Jerry Fitzpatrick, Bernadette Khan, Ola Kolade and Louisa Woodley

Co-optee Members

Elaine Jones (Voting Diocesan Representative (Catholic Diocese)) and Paul O'Donnell (Voting Parent Governor Representative)

Also Present: Councillor Alisa Flemming

Apologies: Josephine Copeland (Co-opted Teacher Representative)

PART A

1/22 Minutes of the Previous Sub-Committee Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 2 November 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

The Chair also took the opportunity to extend the thanks of the Sub-Committee to Leo Morrell who was standing down from his role as one of co-opted members of the Sub-Committee.

2/22 Disclosures of Interest

There were no disclosure of interest made at the meeting.

3/22 Urgent Business (if any)

The Chair advised that the final version of the Task and Finish Group's report on school exclusions and off-rolling had been circulated before the meeting to give the Sub-Committee an opportunity to review the content before signing off the final version of the report. Members noted one particular substantive change to the previous draft relating to the number of children with special educational needs in the borough.

Resolved: That the first part of the Task and Finish Group's report be agreed.

4/22 Action List Update

The Sub-Committee considered the outstanding actions from its previous meetings. It was noted that an update on antenatal health visits would be provided at a future meeting of the Sub-Committee, most likely in the summer.

It was agreed that the Chair would meet with officers outside of the meeting to review and clear the remaining actions on the list and an update would be provided on the outcome from this work at the next meeting of the Sub-Committee on 1 March 2022.

5/22 Early Help, Children Social Care & Education Performance Dashboards

The Sub-Committee considered the performance dashboards set out on pages 15 to 30 of the agenda. The dashboards were a regular item on the agenda and provided for the Sub-Committee to give an overview of performance in the Children's Social Care and Education services. Concern was raised about indicator EH7 which detailed the percentage of cases closed due to families no longer requiring services, which had consistently been above the 10% target throughout the year. It was advised that some families no longer required support from Early Help because they had engaged with alternative services themselves. The service was managing its waiting list through a duty system, with regular check-ins scheduled with families to ensure their needs were being met. Given it was a demand led service, the Sub-Committee acknowledged that it could be difficult to achieve some of the targets within the social care system.

Indicators could be affected for a variety of reasons, with the fluctuation in caseloads, staff turnover and recruitment having an impact. Recently scheduling visits had been more challenging due to the impact from the omicron variant on staff absences.

Given the need to make significant savings within the Service, it was agreed that indicators on the financial performance of the directorate would be added to future iterations of the dashboard to provide the Sub-Committee with reassurance that budget were being appropriately managed.

Conclusions

Following the discussion on this item, the Children & Young People Sub-Committee agreed the following conclusions:-

1. It was recognised that there was a range of factors that could have a negative impact upon service delivery, but it was acknowledged that the Senior Management were aware of these factors and were actively managing these risks.
2. In light of the budget savings required from the Service in 2022-23, it would be important to include financial indicators in the dashboard, to allow the Sub-Committee to monitor progress made in delivering the budget.

6/22 Children, Young People & Education Budget Scrutiny Challenge

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 31 to 42 of the agenda along with a supplement, which provided a response to the three areas within the Children, Young People and Education budget targeted by the Sub-Committee for in-depth scrutiny. The three areas selected were: -

1. The review of care packages for children with disabilities aged 0-17.
2. The impact of the reduction in spend on the adolescent service.
3. The funding gap for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

The Sub-Committee was asked to consider whether the savings identified were deliverable, sustainable and did not present an unacceptable risk. Consideration was also given to whether the potential impact upon service users and the wider community from the savings was understood by the senior management of the service and the Cabinet Member, and that all reasonable alternative options had been explored and no better options existed. The conclusions agreed by the Sub-Committee would be reported to the Scrutiny & Overview Committee at its meeting scheduled for 15 February.

The Sub-Committee considered each of the three areas in turn, starting with the proposal to review care packages for children with disabilities up to the age of 18. During the introduction to this section provided by the Head of Social Work with Families & Children, Rodica Cobarzan, the Sub-Committee was given an overview of the review process for care packages. This included the work with the Transitions service for young people approaching the age of 18. Case studies which had resulted in both reduced and increased care packages were also provided to the Sub-Committee.

Following the introduction, it was acknowledged by the Sub-Committee that the budget position of the Council required difficult decisions to be made. However, reassurance was sought that reassessments would not lead to an adverse impact upon the children or their families. It was confirmed that care packages were continually reviewed and reassessed to ensure the best outcomes for the child were being achieved. It was likely that the efficiency savings required would be achieved through reviewing service providers, rather than the level of care provided.

It was highlighted that many families were opting for the direct payment model, which delivered a saving to the Council. This led to a concern being raised by the Sub-Committee that the direct payment system allowing families to buy their own agency support may not have the same level of quality or consistency required as opposed to the higher quality support acquired using local authority input.

In response to a question about whether there had been any challenge from families because of the changes introduced, it was confirmed that there had been no tribunals. Assessments would be reviewed as required to ensure there was full transparency between the Council and families over decision

making. There had been a low number of complaints received to date, which had been responded to as a priority.

It was acknowledged by Members that it was an ongoing challenge to ensure that commissioned services met the needs of the community, particularly given the level of resource available. However, this meant there needed to be a clear focus on the outcomes delivered by these services to ensure community needs were being met. It was questioned whether there was sufficient data available to inform the commissioning process going forward. It was important to use both quantitative and qualitative data to gain a full understanding of local need. Reassurance was given that Service understood the importance of reviewing the provision of commissioned services and had been improving its monitoring processes over several years, which had been reflected in the recent SEND inspection.

Concerns raised by the Sub-Committee about the history of overspending within the service were acknowledged by officers. It was confirmed that financial control had been prioritised over the past year, which had resulted in a much more robust and visible indication of costs being available. It was agreed that consideration would be given to what metrics could be provided to the Sub-Committee to provide ongoing reassurance that the finances within the service were being effectively managed.

Members were keen for further information on the processes used to be able to make a judgement on the robustness of the financial controls within the service. It was advised that the importance of ensuring that all current packages were recorded accurately, with a clear trail for expenditure for each child had been emphasised to officers throughout the service and this would continue.

At this stage the discussion moved onto the second priority area, the support for vulnerable adolescents. During the introduction, it was acknowledged that this area presented significant challenges, particularly around higher risk children. These challenges were under constant review, using a multi-disciplinary approach which required careful coordination and continual refinement to ensure that the adolescents needs were being addressed.

Given the potential risks, it was questioned how these were being managed and whether the response was constrained by the budget. It was confirmed that it was important to have a flexible response, including having the ability to be able to reallocate resources as required.

It was highlighted that the recruitment and retention of staff was an ongoing issue that was mirrored across most local authorities in the country. The decline in the supply of temporary workers was flagged as a potential issue, but officers reassured the Sub-Committee that they were aware of this trend and were working with other authorities to address. The level of funding available for recruitment was not the main challenge, instead it was finding staff with the right skills. Recruitment, retention and turnover had a constant impact upon the experience available in the system.

It was questioned how the risk presented by the limited supply of staff was being managed going forward. It was confirmed that the salaries offered by the Council were competitive and transformational change was needed to ensure local staff were being retained for the sake of the children and the organisation. The latest offer had been reviewed to make it more attractive for staff to retain expertise. The Council was working with partners to establish a multidisciplinary approach to staffing which help to improve the attractiveness of working in Croydon.

It was highlighted that there was a reference in the report to work on developing new indicators for vulnerable adolescents and as such it was questioned when these would be available. It was confirmed that further work was required on the development of new indicators, with benchmarking proving to be complex and reliant on collaborative working to collect the appropriate information.

The meeting moved on to the final section of this item which concerned the budget for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). During the introduction to this section, it was emphasised that any additional pressure would have to be met and that most of the additional cost were for over 18s. There was also a threshold at 21 years of age. The model included an estimation of the UASC who were NEET. This was not expected to be a big risk as many were not allowed to work.

In response to a question about the reliability of the estimates provided in the report, it was confirmed that these had been tested and confirmed as being reasonable assumptions on which to base the budget.

Given the actual cost of providing support to UASC had repeatedly exceeded the budgeted amount over a long period of time, it was questioned whether a reserve had been earmarked to manage this risk. It was confirmed that the additional support required for UASC in 2022-23 was estimated to be £2.9m, which had not been accounted for. Although the Government had provided one-off funding in 2021-22, the continued funding shortfall would continue to be raised as a significant challenge to the Council's budget. It was agreed that the potential risk created by the shortfall in funding for UASC would be flagged to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee as a significant concern.

At the conclusion of the item, the Chair summarised the discussion noting that a significant degree of confidence could be taken from the responses given by officers to the questions raised by the Sub-Committee. The three areas remained significant areas of risk to Council budget and would need to be revisited throughout the year by the Sub-Committee to ensure they remained on track.

Resolved: The Sub-Committee agreed that the Chair would provide a summary of its discussion to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee on 15 February 2022.

7/22 Education Estates Strategy

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 43 to 134 of the agenda which provided an overview of the Education Estates Strategy for its feedback, before consideration by the Cabinet.

The report was introduced by the Council's Director of Education, Shelley Davies, during which comparisons on persistent absences and the work focussed on analysing data were highlighted. It was advised that it was important to focus upon contributing factors, which were being reviewed in greater depth. It was acknowledged that the impact of pandemic over the past two years had affected the availability of data, however it was noted that schools should be highlighting attendance where persistent absence was an issue. Schools would also be taking other factors into account alongside absences.

The work focused on addressing surplus school places was highlighted, including an in-depth review of shared resources and exploring opportunities for schools to generate additional income.

It was questioned whether there had been any formal discussion with head teachers as a totality from both primary and secondary about the estates strategy and whether feedback from this had been included in the evaluation. It was confirmed that there had been discussions with the Schools Forum, Schools Block Working Group and Secondary Head Teachers Meeting. The Sub-Committee welcomed confirmation of the unified approach deployed and it was agreed that a briefing summarising these meetings would be shared with the Sub-Committee.

In response to a question about the support available for schools in danger of not managing their places, it was confirmed that support was provided to individual schools as well as wider conversations on a borough wide level. It was acknowledged there had been difficulties during the pandemic due to practical issues, but officers were focussing on taking this forward.

It was agreed that the decline in numbers at some schools was a significant risk, with it questioned whether there were any radical ideas that could be used to support schools whose excess spaces were above the 5% target. It was also agreed that there needed to be a greater clarity around the risks to the Council of schools going into deficit. It was advised that there was a focus on early intervention with schools and reassurance was given that it should not have an impact on the Council's budget.

The Chair acknowledged the support by the committee for a study on excess places within the Borough.

Conclusions:

At the end of this item the Children & Young People Sub-Committee agreed that:

1. The content of the Education Estates Strategy report was noted.
2. Although reassurance was provided on the risks presented by schools with excess places, it was agreed that the emphasis on early intervention and support should continue to ensure the risks were managed as well as possible.
3. Further information on the school numbers broken down by school and age groups was requested.

8/22 Croydon Safeguarding Children Board - Annual Report 2020-21

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 135 to 182 of the agenda which presented the Annual Report for 2020-21 from the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board. The Sub-Committee was asked to review the report and provide feedback ahead of its consideration by the Cabinet.

It was agreed that it was essential for the Partnership to ensure it was working effectively together in order to avoid duplication. Further consideration was needed to identify a means of providing evidence in future annual reports to demonstrate the Partnership worked efficiently and effectively together. It was acknowledged that had been a delay in provided the 2020-21 annual report, but given the pandemic this delay was understandable.

Reassurance was provided to the Sub-Committee about the commitment of the partners, which had contributed greatly to the ability of the Partnership to plan its work. It was highlighted that positive action had been identified, despite the challenges of the pandemic.

The Sub-Committee agreed that the key for next year was to look at how to identify the quality of work that had taken place, and to focus on outcomes rather than just the tasks completed.

At the conclusion of this item the Chair thanks officers for their attendance at the meeting and engagement with the discussion of the Sub-Committee.

Conclusion:

At the end of this item the Children & Young People Sub-Committee concluded

1. That it was happy for the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board Annual Report 2020-21 to be submitted to the Cabinet in its current format.
2. That further consideration needed to be given to how to demonstrate in future reports the effectiveness of the partnership, with a robust set of indicators used to track progress.
3. The Sub-Committee agreed that it would be in favour of engaging with the Board at an early stage in the development of the next Annual

Report to ensure that concerns raised about the content of this year's report were addressed.

9/22 What Difference Has This Meeting Made To Croydon's Children

At the conclusion of the meeting the Sub-Committee considered what difference the meeting had made to the children of Croydon. It was concluded that it had been a good meeting, which had benefited from the preparatory work undertaken in advance, including the budget briefing provided in November.

It was agreed that future reports on the education estates strategy should be expanded to include budgets for other areas of education spend. Should it be possible, consideration of this report should be scheduled for the autumn rather than at a later stage in the process.

It was also agreed that before reviewing the next annual report from the Safeguarding Children Board, the Sub-Committee should look to test the partnership arrangements of the Board. The format for this would need to be carefully planned to ensure that the process was effective.

The budget situation within the Service was likely to remain a challenge for the foreseeable future and would need to be closely monitored by the Sub-Committee to ensure it remained on-track for delivery.

The Chair acknowledged final comments from colleagues and thanked them for their input into what had been an interesting meeting.

The meeting ended at 9.00 pm

Signed:

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Date:

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