

# Public Document Pack

## Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee

Meeting of held on Tuesday, 23 January 2024 at 6.30 pm in The Council Chamber, Town Hall, Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

### MINUTES

**Present:** Councillors Councillor Richard Chatterjee (Chair), Councillor Maddie Henson (Vice-Chair), Amy Foster, Mark Johnson, Helen Redfern, Manju Shahul-Hameed and Catherine Wilson

#### Co-optee Members

Paul O'Donnell (Voting Parent Governor Representative)

#### Also

**Present:** Councillor Maria Gatland (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People)  
Councillor Joseph Lee (Deputy Cabinet Member for Children and Young People)  
Elaine Jones (Voting Diocesan Representative (Catholic Diocese)) (Virtual)

**Apologies:** Josephine Copeland (Non-voting Teacher representative) and Councillors Henson and Ramsey.

### PART A

#### 1/24 **Apologies for absence**

Apologies were received from Josephine Copeland (Non-voting Teacher representative) and for lateness from Councillor Ramsey.

Apologies were received from Councillor Henson, for who Councillor Foster attended as their substitute.

Apologies were given for former Councillor Mike Bonello, who had resigned from the Council on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2024.

#### 2/24 **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on the 14 November 2023 were approved as an accurate record.

#### 3/24 **Disclosures of Interest**

There were no disclosures of interest.

#### **4/24 Urgent Business (if any)**

There were no items of urgent business.

#### **5/24 Budget Scrutiny Challenge**

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out in the supplementary agenda, which provided information on the identified budget proposals for 2024/25. The Director of Quality, Commissioning & Performance and the Director of Children's Social Care introduced the item and went through the report. The Sub-Committee considered the reports and looked to satisfy the following questions:

1. Are the savings deliverable, sustainable and not an unacceptable risk?
2. Is the impact on service users and the wider community understood?
3. Have all reasonable alternative options been explored and do no better options exist?

#### 2024-28 SAV CYPE 001 – Children's Social Care staffing budget realignment

The Director of Quality, Commissioning & Performance explained that, in light of this saving no longer being included in the Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), Finance Officers were preparing an updated MTFS that would look to achieve the savings in other areas of the Council's budget. The updated MTFS would take into account the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement, feedback from the budget engagement process, and updated Council Tax and business rate income forecasts.

Members asked about flexible working in Children's Social Care, and the Director of Children's Social Care explained that the general approach in the department meant that social care staff were in office three days a week, and worked two days a week from home. The Sub-Committee heard that in office work was important for staff support, wellbeing and supervision, with team meetings taking place in person, as well as other service, team and learning events. The Director of Children's Social Care explained that working in person was important to ensure that the service held risk collectively.

The Sub-Committee asked about current vacancy rates in Children's Social Care and heard that vacancies were filled by agency workers; there were some uncovered vacancies, but work was ongoing with the agency provider to address this. The Director of Children's Social Care explained that using locum social workers was vital to ensure that caseloads remained manageable; there would always be some vacancies, due to gaps between staff leaving and starting, but it was important that these were closed where possible. Members queried whether achieving savings through more intensive work in the family home would require a more labour-intensive approach and cause additional burden for social workers. The Director of Children's Social

Care responded that the aim of filling these vacancies was to ensure that social workers had as much capacity as possible to be more involved in family life and to work closely with early help partners and schools. The importance of partnership working with the new Family Hubs model was also highlighted. Members heard that the aims of bringing on board a CYPE Strategic Transformation Partner would be to understand which forms of intervention led to the best and most expedient results; how the Council might work better with Community Sector providers; and how systems could be streamlined to unlock more staff resource.

Members asked how officers expected to maintain the quality of interventions and meet rising demands without additional staff. The Director of Children's Social Care stated that the support was being provided to frontline managers to improve the quality of supervision and group supervision that, it was explained, was vital to ensure social workers felt supported, and remained resilient, motivated, and upbeat. There was ongoing work to ensure social workers knew what was available in the community, and that this was easily accessible, through the Family Services Directory. The Sub-Committee heard that the management of caseloads and workloads was vital, particularly by looking at how systems could be changed to be less burdensome on social workers. The Director of Children's Social Care highlighted that Croydon used a systemic model to ensure social workers learnt from each other, as well as making sure there was good access to training to ensure their work could be as effective as possible.

The Sub-Committee asked how the wellbeing of social workers was upheld and heard that self-care services were promoted alongside honest and open discussions on the importance of the work, valuing the self and activities outside of work. The Director of Children's Social Care explained that there were also ongoing conversations about issues for women in the profession; discrimination; oppression; the role of men and fathers in families and how to have difficult conversations. Members heard that many in Children's Social Care lived in Croydon and were proud to work in their community; as a result; staff often found it difficult when the Council was criticised in the media. To address this and staff wellbeing, there was a celebrating success meeting once a month to recognise where good work was taking place, and to allow colleagues to appreciate each other's work.

Members asked about recruitment, and the Director of Children's Social Care explained that forthcoming regulation of the agency market following the Social Care Review would hopefully make permanent positions at Local Authorities more attractive, as well as requiring better referencing and longer notice periods for agency workers. It was highlighted that long-term agency workers and permanent social workers played important roles for children by providing continuity.

The Sub-Committee asked about the CYPE Strategic Transformation Partner and the Director of Quality, Commissioning & Performance explained that the department had access to transformation funding through the CYPE Transformation Programme. This would be used to address both the financial

and improvement challenges in the directorate, by bringing in expert capacity to look at risk sharing, outcomes for children and families, cost reductions, performance improvements and procurement processes. The CYPE Strategic Transformation Partner would help the Directorate find sustainable changes and to help continue the trend of safely reducing the number of children in care. The Director of Quality, Commissioning & Performance stated that a number of local authorities were also currently helping the Council review services and challenge areas of practice, but that a CYPE Strategic Transformation Partner would be a consultancy or other organisation with a proven background track record of working with Children's Services. The Council would have a market warming session later this month to inform the scope and pricing of a CYPE Strategic Transformation Partner. The Director of Children's Social Care explained that Greenwich Council had undertaken a peer review of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), and Islington Council were working with the Young People 16+ Service under the Sector Led Improvement Programme (SLIP) funded by the Department for Education (DfE) to look at practice outcomes with Team Managers.

The Sub-Committee asked if social workers had access to key worker housing, and whether there was a way of working with the Planning Committee to ensure that there were sufficient levels of key worker housing in the borough. The Director of Children's Social Care explained that there were a small number of key worker housing units available, but these were only available to CYPE staff on certain income bands; Members heard that this was a good scheme that was not run by all local authorities. The Director of Children's Social Care stated that, in terms of recruitment, they were in favour of local people working in their community; this was supported by the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) scheme and social work apprenticeships. Members heard that the Council had put in a bid to the DfE for additional social work apprenticeship funding to enable Family Support workers, or key workers in early help, to train as social workers on their existing salaries.

The Sub-Committee asked about the delivery of Family Hubs in Croydon. The Director of Education explained that this was at very early stages, but that some services had begun operating out of the Woodlands Centre. The next steps would involve identifying new sites and launching a digital offer. The services in Family Hubs would follow the DfE model but would also reflect the local needs of Croydon as well as the voices of families and young people. The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People explained that lots of children, partners and voluntary organisations had attended the launch of Family Hubs, and that it had been a very positive event and a good step forward. The Family Hub transformation funding would run over three years to ensure a sustainable model could be established in Croydon through working with partners.

## **Conclusions**

1. The Sub-Committee were grateful for the information and responses provided by officers and the Cabinet Member at the meeting.

2. The Sub-Committee were reassured that officers and the Cabinet Member had recognised that holding a 7% vacancy would present an unacceptable risk in Children's Social Care, and that this saving would not be included in the updated Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).
3. The Sub-Committee were confident that removing this saving from the MTFS was the correct decision to protect children and ensure that caseloads for social workers did not become unmanageable.
4. The Sub-Committee understood that the £1.1 million saving would need to be achieved and that the updated MTFS would set out how this saving would be made while also considering the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement, feedback from the budget engagement process and updated Council Tax and business rate income forecasts.
5. The Sub-Committee were unable to comment on whether the £1.1 million saving in the budget would be achievable as the information on where this saving was to be achieved was not yet available. As such, the Sub-Committee would recommend the Scrutiny & Overview Committee reassure itself on the deliverability of any new savings proposals at its meeting on 12 February 2024, when considering the wider Budget.
6. The Sub-Committee were reassured by the peer challenge work being undertaken with other local authorities to look at different areas of Children's Services, and by the Council's engagement with the Sector Led Improvement Programme (SLIP) to improve practice outcomes.

#### 2024-28 SAV CYPE 003 – Review of Children Looked After Placements

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People explained that they had met with the two placements teams responsible for searching the market to make sure that there was the right support in place for each child. Members heard that referrals to placements had become competitive, with many local authorities seeking limited spaces. In the view of the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People this was wrong, and they expressed their frustrations with the placements market. The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People explained that a new Children's Home would be brought into Croydon next year, which would accommodate for a few young people with complex needs at a time, for short periods, and the development of the home would be funded by the DfE.

The Sub-Committee queried whether the Council had considered creating an in-house semi-independent placement provision. The Director of Children's Social Care explained that there were a number of providers in Croydon, and it needed to be understood whether the Council would benefit most from just improving relationships with these organisations, or through developing its own provision; Members heard that there were benefits and drawbacks to both private and in-house provision, but that any in-house offer would have significant up-front costs. The Director of Quality, Commissioning & Performance highlighted that all local authorities had to have a 'sufficiency

strategy' for placements; in developing this, it had been found that some providers would be in favour of 'preferred provider' arrangements, and that this could provide the opportunity to ensure the desired quality and standards were met, as well as integrating expertise from the Council into provider placements.

Members asked if there had been consideration of using Private Boarding Schools as care placements. The Director of Children's Social Care explained that this had been investigated, but that children in Boarding Schools also needed homes, and that this kind of placement presented challenges with providing institutional and other specialised care that children may need. The Council did work with independent schools in the borough, including through the virtual school, and specifically through Trinity School's summer school.

The Sub-Committee commented on the target to increase the use of in-house provision, and asked who was responsible for ensuring this took place. It was explained that decisions for Children not to stay at home needed to be made by Heads of Service or the Director of Children's Social Care and underpinned by compelling evidence. Once this referral was written, the first port of call was the Council's in-house fostering service, followed by independent foster care in Croydon. The Director of Children's Social Care highlighted the importance of making sure children could stay in their own schools and in contact with their friends. If a child's placement needed to change then this was decided at Care Panel, chaired by the Director of Children's Social Care, where there was always a consideration of in-house provision. The quality of service the Council provided to Foster Carers was highlighted as important to ensure that Croydon had a good reputation in the fostering community, but it was also emphasised that matching children to the correct placement was crucial. The Director of Quality, Commissioning & Performance responded to questions on the age profile of foster carers, explaining that often these individuals were older, and so it was important to ensure more foster carers were being recruited to grow the in-house provision, and to account for foster carers retiring. It was clarified that the aim to increase the use of in-house provision would not prejudice risk and needs assessments carried out by social workers, and that decisions would not be taken that were purely finance led.

Members highlighted the challenges to achieving these savings listed in the report, and asked what plans were in place to address these. The Director of Quality, Commissioning & Performance recognised that the target was ambitious and explained that addressing some of these challenges was specifically in the scope for the CYPE Strategic Transformation Partner. Members heard that, with the directorates' transformation focus and robust performance monitoring, these challenges could be closely tracked to allow the Council to react and minimise obstacles to achieving the desired savings whilst delivering the desired outcomes for children.

The Sub-Committee asked about risks from families opting out of early intervention practices. The Director of Children's Social Care explained that there were risks in this area, and that addressing this relied on the skills of

social workers and their ability to negotiate, to listen to children and families, and to advocate for families on issues to build trust and confidence. It was also important that the offer provided by Croydon reflected what families needed.

Members asked about how the Council was working to engage and build trust with providers. The Director of Quality, Commissioning & Performance explained that the placement team built appropriate relationships with providers working within framework agreements, and by working in partnership with the commissioning alliance. The importance of making the Council's processes as simple and efficient as possible was highlighted as an important aspect of building good relationships with suppliers.

### **Conclusions**

1. The Sub-Committee shared their gratitude to social workers and foster carers who were working to meet the needs of children in the borough.
2. The Sub-Committee wanted to monitor the efforts of the Council to increase the in-house foster provision in the borough and agreed that this should be added to the Work Programme for 2024/25.
3. Members were optimistic that the savings targeted from the review of children looked after placements would be deliverable, in light of the work already undertaken in this area during 2023/24.
4. The Sub-Committee were reassured that both the officers and the Cabinet Member understood the potential impact upon service users and the wider community of delivering this saving, and that no decisions would be taken for financial reasons, if they would be harmful to children and young people.
5. The Sub-Committee were supportive of the planned increase of in-house provision through the opening of a new Children's Home supported by Department for Education funding.
6. Members were optimistic about plans to continue to improve the Council's relationship with placement providers through the continued development of processes, and through possible 'preferred provider' agreements.
7. The Sub-Committee were confident that the scope for the procurement of a proposed CYPE Strategic Transformation Partner seemed well targeted but understood that the process was still in the early stages of development and that a market warming exercise had yet to take place.

**6/24**

### **Cabinet Report - Education Estates Strategy**

The Sub-Committee considered a paper set out in the supplementary agenda, which provided a report due for consideration at Cabinet on 31 January 2024 on the Education Estates Strategy for Pre-Decision Scrutiny. The Director of Education and the Head of Service for Early Years, School Place Planning and Admissions who introduced the report. The Chair thanked officers for providing written answers to a number of the Sub-Committee's questions on the paper in advance of the meeting.

Members asked about in-year admissions and what support was available to assist families moving into the borough with finding school places. The Director of Education explained that there had been a significant number of in-year admissions over the last couple of months. The Sub-Committee heard that the local authority received in-year admissions, but that schools, were their own admissions authority; because of this, the Council process the applications and pass these applications directly on to the schools named in the application. The Council did chase schools to respond to in-year admissions where these were outstanding and it was acknowledged that sometimes responses could take a significant period. Where Members submitted casework regarding in-year admissions, the Education department did respond directly to families and highlighted when applications were being submitted to schools with no available places. Additional support was provided to these families in identifying where there were available school places in the borough.

It was acknowledged that admissions for year 11 were more challenging, especially where students had not accessed the GCSE curriculum previously. The Director of Education explained that in response to this, the Fair Access Protocol had been looked at to separate out the 'managed moves' element, which had now been retitled as the 'inclusion' element; this had begun to yield positive results for in-year admissions. The Council was looking at what else could be done differently for year 10 and 11 in-year admissions to best work with schools, and had established a working group with head teachers to look at how best to support families moving into the borough.

The Sub-Committee asked whether the Council funded tuition or other support whilst school placements were being sought. The Director of Education explained that the Council had limited powers in this area, but could write to the Secretary of State to ensure a child was admitted to a school. There was a focus on partnership working with schools and conversations with head teachers on the in-year admissions process..

The Sub-Committee asked about modifications to schools to ensure they lost less heat, and asked if similar work was being considered to make sure schools remained cool during heatwaves. The Head of Service for Early Years, School Place Planning and Admission explained that the Education department worked closely with Capital Delivery colleagues to conduct risk assessments and ensure health and safety was paramount in all schools, with all regulations being correctly followed. Whilst ensuring schools could be properly heated was the responsibility of the local authority, overheating in schools was regulated by the DfE and was the responsibility of the schools themselves.

The Chair commented on the conversion of Saffron Valley Collegiate, and thanked officers for their response that this would not delay provision as the Service level agreement between the Council and the Management Committee of Saffron Valley Collegiate would remain in place; this would ensure that the Council continued to meet its statutory duty to provide

education for young people excluded from school who are unable to access a school place. The Director of Education clarified that Saffron Valley Collegiate was Croydon's Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) and that this was split over four different locations, divided by Key Stage 3 and 4.

The Sub-Committee noted that additional spaces for the PRUs were commissioned, and asked how the demand and costs for these spaces had changed over the last year. The Director of Education explained that Saffron Valley Collegiate is a local authority school, which meant that the commissioning was based on the needs of the individual child using top-up funding, in the same way as special educational needs and disability (SEND) provision. It was acknowledged that there was increased demand from Year 1 children following the pandemic; it was inappropriate to place such young children into Saffron Valley Collegiate and alternative provision would be considered for these cases. The Director of Education explained that the Council was considering putting additional support into schools ahead of children being excluded or put on fixed term suspensions.

Members asked if it would be possible to have a list of the schools that fell under each area in Appendix 4, and for a case study or example of what prolonged surplus places could mean for a school. The Director of Education stated that this could be provided, and suggested that an example could be provided of a past situation where the Council had concerns about falling roles and the impact of this on the school.

### **Request for Information**

The Sub-Committee requested additional information on Appendix 4 (Available Primary School Places vs SCAP 2023 Pupil Projections) explaining which schools fell under each Planning Area, and for some information on a past situation where the Council had concerns about falling roles and the impact of this on the school.

### **Conclusions**

The Sub-Committee thanked officers and Cabinet Member for their responses and for providing written answers to their questions in advance of the meeting.

The Sub-Committee were encouraged that the Council was considering the impact of the pandemic on increased demand for alternative provision for younger children, and on PRU spaces.

## **7/24 Early Help, Children's Social Care and Education Dashboard**

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 17 to 22 of the agenda, which provided the Early Help, Children's Social Care and Education Dashboard, and updated additional 'Red' indicators reviewed at the previous meeting.

On M37, the Sub-Committee asked what actions were being taken to address this indicator and the Chair queried the timetable for improvement. The Director of Children's Social Care explained that there was rigorous multi-agency oversight where children were subject to a subsequent Child Protection Plan, especially when this was within a short space of time. A Panel met every month to look at all of these children, and it was more likely that the 'Pre-Proceedings Process' may accompany subsequent CPPs and that these would work to shorter timescales. CPPs usually took between 6 and 18 months to have an effect, and it was highlighted that CPPs were always instated when needed. The Director of Children's Social Care stated that M37 had reduced and plateaued, with most of the children on a subsequent plan having last been on a CPP over 3 years ago. The Director of Quality, Commissioning & Performance agreed that this indicator was a concern for the Council but explained that it was predicted that this indicator would start to improve over the latter half of 2024.

On Appendix B, the Director of Children's Social Care explained that these indicators related to earlier conversations in the meeting about rising demands and caseloads, and their impacts on social workers. It was acknowledged that these indicators were not where they should be, but that the service was focussed on completing supervisions and visits. The Director of Children's Social Care reassured the Sub-Committee that the service reported every month on each child that had not been seen in timescale; Heads of Service required Team Managers to put management oversight record on these files and explain to these children why they had not been seen. Where there were vacancies and illness, teams triaged cases for visits and worked closely with schools to provide some limited safeguarding oversight. Some families were persistent in refusing visitation and, in these cases, the application of a CPP became a stronger consideration. There were Family Support Workers in the Family Assessment Service who could undertake welfare visits, although it was recognised that this was not in place of a statutory social work visit.

The Chair and Sub-Committee thanked officers for their detailed and candid responses and reassurance.

#### **8/24 Cabinet Response to Scrutiny Recommendations**

The Sub-Committee noted the report.

#### **9/24 Scrutiny Work Programme 2023-24**

The Sub-Committee noted the report.

The Sub-Committee requested some information at a future meeting on the impact in Croydon of new London-Wide Early Years funding at a future meeting.

The meeting ended at 8.40 pm

**Signed:**

**Date:**

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