

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Thursday, 11 June 2015

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 1, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Thursday, 11 June 2015 at 7.30 pm.

Present: Councillors: N Ward (Vice-Chair, in the Chair), Donovan, Ngongo and Wayne

Co-opted Members: James Stephenson, Secondary Parent Governor
Mary Clement, Roman Catholic Diocese

Also Present: Councillors: Caluori

Councillor Nick Ward in the Chair

56 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. A1)

Apologies for absence were received from Erol Baduna and Councillors Kaya Comer-Schwartz, Diarmaid Ward and Angela Picknell.

57 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. A2)

None.

58 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. A3)

None.

59 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (ITEM NO. A4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 28 April 2015 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

60 CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. A5)

The Committee asked for their congratulations to be recorded on the birth of Ignatz Charles Comer-Schwartz, the son of Councillor Kaya Comer-Schwartz.

The Committee thanked officers for their contribution to the review of Early Help services.

61 MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE (ITEM NO. A6)

RESOLVED:

That the membership, terms of reference and dates of meetings of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee for the municipal year 2015/16 be noted.

62 ITEMS FOR CALL IN (IF ANY) (ITEM NO. A7)

None.

63 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. A8)

The Chair outlined the procedure for public questions and the filming and recording of meetings.

EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES (ITEM NO. B1)

Penny Kenway, Head of Early Years and Childcare, and Jason Strelitz, Acting Assistant Director of Public Health, made a presentation to the Committee, copy interleaved, during which the following main points were made –

- The Committee noted progress made on the First 21 Months programme, early education for funded two year olds, and the introduction of the integrated review.
- It was noted that the relatively high levels of deprivation in Islington had a negative impact on the education and health of children in early childhood. Although Islington did not compare favourably to other London Boroughs and nationally in areas such as tooth decay, obesity, learning and development and homelessness; Islington did perform favourably in levels of immunisation and breastfeeding.
- Immunisation levels had significantly increased since 2008. It was commented that this was leading to better outcomes for families and indicated that related publicity had been successful.
- Significant progress had been made on infant mortality, which had decreased from above the London and England average in 2003-05 to below average in 2009-11.
- Although Islington was behind national and inner-London averages in terms of children achieving a 'good level of development' at the end of reception, the percentage of children achieving this level had increased from 39% in 2009 to 58% in 2014. Whilst this was encouraging, the Committee commented that it appeared that Islington was consistently behind other inner-London Boroughs and enquired why this may be. It was suggested that the particularly high levels of deprivation in Islington meant that local children had to progress further to achieve the 'good level of development' standard.
- The apparent decrease in 'good level of development' performance in 2013 was due to changes to the early years foundation stage profile assessment criteria. Since this date the Council had worked with teachers to moderate their assessments and increase understanding of how children can be best supported to achieve their full potential against the assessment criteria. A particular focus on language and personal social development had been adopted, however it was noted that further work was required to increase physical mobility.
- It was noted that the issues most frequently presented to Children's Services included domestic violence, neglect, parental mental health, and parental disputes. Key factors identified in social care assessments included drug and alcohol abuse in addition to these. It was requested that exact figures be circulated to the Committee.
- An overview was provided of the services available to pregnant women, children at age 0-2, and at age 3-4. It was explained that universal activities at Children's Centres such as 'stay and play' sessions helped to signpost families to targeted and specialist services.
- The key challenges facing early years services were (i) information governance and consent for information sharing, (ii) further integration of services; and (iii) ensuring ICT systems enable the impact of services to be measured.
- A member suggested that due to the financial climate it was unlikely that the Council would be able to increase resources to services in the near future. It was therefore queried what cost-effective measures could be taken to support the work of early years services. In response, it was advised that the service recognised the difficult financial climate, however investment in ICT systems could lead to a more efficient and targeted service, which may both save money and improve outcomes.

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- It was explained that the relatively high levels of deprivation in Islington attracted early years pupil premium funding of around £300 per pupil per year.
- It was commented that the Committee could further investigate (i) if the most deprived families were accessing children's centres for the right amount of time; and (ii) the consistency of early years provision, as although all providers were committed to learning, it was thought that different providers gave differing levels of priority to literacy and numeracy. A member of the Committee suggested that publicly comparing providers on such measures may help to raise standards.
- A member of the public queried in which areas Islington children needed to make the most progress. In response it was advised that further work was needed to develop literacy, numeracy, and understanding of the world.

RESOLVED:

That the progress of the Council's early childhood services be noted.

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EARLY HELP: DRAFT REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS (ITEM NO. B2)

The Committee considered the draft report and recommendations of the 'Impact of Early Help on Preventing Escalation to Statutory Services' review. A discussion was had during which the following main points were made –

- It was agreed that future scrutiny reviews would include regular reflection sessions for the Committee to take stock of the evidence received to date and reconsider their approach to the review as required.
- Reference was made to recent tragedies involving young people and the need for early help services to engage with adolescents. In light of this it was suggested that the Committee could further review the engagement of adolescents with support services.
- A discussion was had on the purpose of the recommendations. It was explained that some recommendations proposed specific actions, others requested that some areas be given further consideration, and others expressed political objectives. It was queried if future reviews should focus on specific actions to improve council services.
- A member of the public suggested that scrutiny reviews could be enhanced by inviting independent experts and members of the public to attend meetings. The Committee agreed that this proposal would be investigated.
- Some members expressed that the wording of recommendations should be revised for clarity and to make more specific points about the successes of the service and the particular actions suggested by the Committee. A discussion was had on this topic and the Committee considered each recommendation individually.
- It was agreed that a number of amendments should be made to the report before submitting to the Executive.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the report be agreed, subject to the following amendments:
 - a) That recommendation 2 be revised to read: 'That the Council's early help services' successes in creating safe and trusting relationships with families be noted, and consideration be given to how similar approaches to positive relationship building can be adopted by other services, including but not exclusive of schools and housing';
 - b) That the words 'through the Health and Wellbeing Board' be added to recommendation 5;
 - c) That the words 'To combat social isolation' be added to recommendation 8;

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- d) That the words 'and adolescent children themselves' be added to recommendation 10;
- 2) That Democratic Services further consider the use of reflection sessions and how independent experts and members of the public can be encouraged to attend future meetings.

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SCRUTINY TOPICS 2015/16 (ITEM NO. B3)

A discussion was had and the following items were suggested for scrutiny:

- Alternative Provision – to consider the availability and quality of alternative provision; the attainment, aspirations and long-term plans of those in alternative provision; how the Council can make a meaningful contribution to this sector; and how effective alternative provision is at discouraging criminal behaviour. This work could complement another review being carried out by the Schools Forum.
- The Impact of SEN Changes on Children and Families – as deferred from 2014/15, to consider the impact of changes, the experiences of children and young people, and how services can be improved.
- The performance of BME children – to consider attainment and the provision of support services.

In addition, it was noted that the meeting had already suggested that the Committee could consider the consistency of early years provision and the engagement of adolescents with support services.

It was intended for the Committee to focus on one review topic and receive other reports on its areas of interest throughout the year. A member of the public queried why the Committee did not choose multiple topics for review. It was explained that the terms of reference of the Committee required a single topic to be selected and the Policy and Performance Committee could assign the Committee with additional scrutiny topics as required.

It was intended for the Committee's next scrutiny review to commence in September. Members indicated that they would welcome relevant reading material before this date.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That a review of Alternative Provision be undertaken, subject to approval by the Policy and Performance Committee;
- 2) That the Committee undertake any further reviews as instructed by the Policy and Performance Committee;
- 3) That the Committee intend to receive reports on SEN changes, the performance of BME children, the consistency of Early Years provision and the engagement of adolescents with support services throughout the year;
- 4) That a work plan and scrutiny initiation document be submitted to the next meeting.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.00 pm

Chair