

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Tuesday, 28 April 2015

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Tuesday, 28 April 2015 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Comer-Schwartz (Chair), N Ward (Vice-Chair),
Donovan, Ngongo, Poyser, Turan, D Ward and
Wayne

Also Present: **Councillors** Caluori

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

Councillor Kaya Comer-Schwartz in the Chair

45 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. 1)**
Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Nick Ward (for lateness).

46 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. 2)**
None.

47 **DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. 3)**
None.

48 **MINUTES (ITEM NO. 4)**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9 March 2015 be confirmed and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

49 **CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. 5)**
None.

50 **ITEMS FOR CALL IN (IF ANY) (ITEM NO. 6)**
None.

51 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. 7)**
The Chair outlined the procedure for public questions and the filming and recording of meetings.

52 **EARLY HELP: WITNESS EVIDENCE (ITEM NO. B1)**
The Committee received evidence from Stella Clarke, Programme Director for Preventative Services; Marcella McHugh, Delivery Lead for Multi-Agency Team 1; and Geraldine Abrahams, Delivery Lead for Multi-Agency Team 2 from the London Borough of Lambeth, during which the following main points were made –

- Lambeth's early help offering focused on families with children aged five to nineteen years.
- Lambeth had adopted a multi-agency approach to early intervention which included integration with health services, schools and special educational needs services.

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- Lambeth's early help service was delivered by two multi-agency teams on a locality basis and had supported 470 families in the previous year.
- The service had strong relationships with statutory services with a clear step-up and step-down procedure. In the first three quarters of 2014/15, 174 families had stepped down from statutory to early help services, and 44 families stepped up from early help to statutory services.
- Multi-agency teams conducted regular visits to service user homes.
- Parenting programmes were provided at community venues through the service.
- Lambeth's service was consent based and had taken a motivational 'life coaching' approach to early help which officers considered to be successful.
- It was noted that the problems faced by families in Lambeth included children and adults with disabilities, children at risk of sexual exploitation, difficulties with housing and benefits, domestic violence, substance abuse, young people classified as NEET, gang violence and children at risk of exclusion.
- Lambeth had sought to improve its service by investing in workforce development.
- The performance of Lambeth's service was managed through the 'Multi-Agency Team (MAT) Outcome Framework' which measured performance against indicators set out in Lambeth's early help strategy. It was noted that these indicators were generally broader societal measures, such as reductions in young people classified as NEET and teenage pregnancy. Lambeth also assessed performance by reviewing the outcomes of individual cases.
- Lambeth was working to further integrate its early help service with its 'Troubled Families' programme. In doing this, Lambeth was considering the skills mix of its staff and case acceptance thresholds. It was considered that integrating the services would make the best use of the available resources.
- Lambeth was seeking to make its service more efficient by working further with schools and children's centres to identify and minimise duplication of services.
- Families could be referred to Lambeth's service by health visitors, schools, children's centres and other agencies. Families were able to self-refer to the service, however an assessment was carried out before self-referrals were accepted.
- A member queried how Lambeth knew if its service was effective. It was advised that, as well as measuring performance indicators, the service was also subject to external assessment and member scrutiny. The service had also recently introduced exit interviews for service leavers. However, it was noted that it was not possible to gauge how many families would otherwise have been referred to statutory services without support from the early help service.
- It was queried how Lambeth ensured that the service was accessible to local people. It was advised that the service carried out outreach work and maintained strong relationships with partner organisations which referred families to the service. The importance of working with the voluntary sector and community groups was emphasised. It was also noted that the service had appointed 'Parent Champions' to promote the work of the service in the community.
- A member queried how the progress of individual families was measured. It was explained that each family worked to an action plan and change was measured at the end of the intervention, however Lambeth did not routinely measure the proportion of families that completed their action plan.
- Lambeth's early help service aimed to work with families over a period of three to six months. This short time scale was considered effective and efficient as it kept families and workers focused on the task at hand.

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- A member queried if Lambeth's service had undergone any reductions in funding and what the impact of this had been. It was advised that, although there had been reductions in funding to children's centres, the multi-agency teams had not yet experienced a decrease in funding. However, it was recognised that the service operated in a difficult financial climate and it was suggested that the service would seek to integrate further with other services to meet future financial challenges.
- It was noted that Lambeth had received a £36million Big Lottery grant to improve services to children aged 0-3.
- Lambeth recognised that providing employment support was one method of supporting families.
- It was queried how Lambeth would enhance its service if money was no object. It was advised that the authority would seek to invest greater resources into child and adolescent mental health services, the Family Nurse Partnership, and evidence-based parenting programmes. The authority would also seek to increase the skills of its workforce, increase community outreach work, and offer greater assistance to partner agencies in identifying families in need of early help services earlier.

The Committee received evidence from Ellen Ryan, Islington Learning and Working (ILW) Manager, during which the following main points were made –

- ILW delivered the iWork service, which provided coaching, mentoring and support to the long-term unemployed. The service was a member of the Parental Employment Partnership, which also included Jobcentre Plus and Children's Services.
- The service provided employment support to parents. It was explained that service users often had complex needs and required intensive support in finding work.
- The iWork service had a 'wrap around' approach and was integrated with early help services.
- The service was co-located with Jobcentre Plus. Clients could be referred to the service from Jobcentre Plus or the Council's early help services. Likewise, the service could refer clients to early help services as required. The service also had a good relationship with local children's centres.
- The service helped to fulfil the Employment Commission recommendation of providing better employment support to Islington residents.
- It was advised that in 2011/12 the service had helped 68 parents into paid work. This number had increased each year to 144 in 2012/13, 292 in 2013/14, and 380 in 2014/15. This increase in performance was attributed to a cultural change in the service. It was explained that the service previously focused on advice and guidance and identifying barriers to employment. The service had since adopted a more positive approach which was focused on motivating and encouraging clients. Officers considered this approach to be more successful.
- A discussion was had on barriers to employment. Many clients suffered from low self-esteem and confidence. Other issues regularly encountered by the service included domestic violence, a lack of affordable and safe childcare, and difficulties in adjusting to a new work/life balance.
- It was noted that service users were often most successful in finding employment when they considered finding employment to be a priority and understood how this would initiate change in other areas of their life.
- The service took a holistic approach to employment support and measured the progress of clients against the 'work star' assessment tool.

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- Practical challenges facing the service included the sharing of data with the Department for Work and Pensions and the use of ICT at the Jobcentre Plus site.
- A discussion was had on the demographics of service users. A significant proportion of the service's clients were female and from BME backgrounds.
- It was commented that there was no particular timescale for helping clients to find paid work, and the service would continue to support clients so long as they were willing to seek employment.
- The Committee noted particular successes of the service; one client who had been out of work for fifteen years had found employment within one month of working with the service.
- Following a question, it was advised that the service did encourage clients to keep in contact after they had found employment, however there was no formal monitoring of this contact. The importance of retaining employment and in-work support was emphasised.
- The Committee noted that the annual cost of the service was £269,000. This was considered good value given the number of people helped into paid employment.
- It was suggested that some parents were unaware of the support services available to them and this could result in anxiety about making changes to their home life. For example, it was suggested that many parents were unaware that the Council funded a childcare bursary to help single parents with the cost of childcare.
- Following a question, it was advised that there were no particular groups which did not engage with the service, however further work would always be needed to reach out to those with the most complex needs.
- It was suggested that the service could be improved through increased promotion, increasing the number of referrals from existing services, and developing a 'hub and spoke' model, where iWork would have outreach 'spokes' in community venues.
- Following a query from a member of the public, it was advised that some clients had taken up employment on zero hours contracts.

The Committee received evidence from Hazel Jordan, CASA Islington Community Alcohol Service, during which the following main points were made –

- The CASA worked alongside early help services to help reduce parental drug and alcohol abuse.
- The CASA team was small, with one manager, three support workers and a part-time administrator.
- The service was previously independent however had merged with Blenheim, a larger addiction organisation, to realise efficiencies.
- Aside from direct work with parents, the organisation also provided training to professionals to increase their capability and confidence in working with those suffering from substance abuse.
- Many service users had complex needs. The organisation had a "whole family" approach to intervention and focused on reducing harm, increasing the strength of service users and building the resilience of children.
- The service received referrals from other agencies, however service users could self-refer and the organisation carried out outreach work to encourage self-referrals at an early stage.
- The organisation had a written partnership agreement with Families First which ensured that the services avoided duplication.

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- The service assessed its outcomes and achievements against its own measures; however there was no nationwide performance framework to benchmark the service against.
- An external evaluation of the service was conducted in 2011. The results of this were very positive and highlighted the strong multi-agency work of the team.
- The service attended 'team around the family' meetings and had attended fifteen multi-agency meetings in the previous quarter.
- The service had received positive feedback from service users advising that the service was non-judgemental and helped to remove the stigma of accessing help. It was commented that this was particularly important for children, who were aware of the stigma surrounding drug and alcohol services from a young age.
- It was commented that service users were often secretive about their substance abuse and for this reason would not engage with other services. The service helped to develop the trust of service users, however also challenged service users when required.
- Following a question, it was noted that the service received few referrals from schools, however would welcome referrals from any school, including free schools and academies.
- The service had a caseload of approximately ten families at any one time. The service worked with families for a period of up to nine months, however service users could receive support for longer if required.
- It was considered that there was no immediate solution to substance abuse and reducing levels of substance abuse would take concerted effort from several agencies.

The Chair thanked all witnesses for their contribution to the scrutiny review.

53

EARLY HELP: NOTES OF SITE VISIT (ITEM NO. B2)

The Committee considered the notes of recent site visits carried out as part of the early help scrutiny and the additional documents requested by members on those visits.

A debate was had in which the following main points were made –

- Further consideration needed to be given as to how the Council measured the success of early help services. It was suggested that the Committee had a role in shaping a vision of success for such services.
- It was commented that all of the parents interviewed had spoken positively of the Council's early help services, which contrasted to the negative experiences some parents had with social services.
- Many of the parents interviewed praised the services for being supportive and listening to their concerns. Although this was welcomed by the Committee, it was considered that the Committee must be careful not to conflate the service's popularity with its achievement of results. Although the Committee was pleased by the praise received for the services, the difficulty of measuring the outcomes of early help services was recognised.
- It was noted that many of the parents interviewed indicated that they would make use of a peer-to-peer support group alongside early help services. It was suggested that such a group would help with social isolation and building community resilience. It was also recognised that such a group would be relatively inexpensive to administer.
- It was noted that few of the parents interviewed had knowledge of the Council's early help services before their referral and it was suggested that

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further outreach work may be required. The implementation of a buddying or 'community champion' scheme was suggested.

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the meeting be confirmed.

54

EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES PRESENTATION (ITEM NO. B3)

The Committee received a presentation from Joe Caluori, Executive Member for Children and Families, on the work and performance of Children's Services, copy interleaved, during which the following main points were made –

- It was recognised that, although there had been an improvement in children's phonics in Year 1, further work was needed to secure significant improvements.
- Six out of ten young people in Islington achieved more than five A*-C grade GCSEs including English and Maths at age 16. The Executive Member advised that the authority was working to improve this statistic.
- Two secondary schools had recently changed leadership and the Executive Member hoped that this would lead to significant improvements.
- It was welcomed that 69% of children attending primary schools in Islington stay in the Borough for secondary education, however the Executive Member advised that further work was needed to improve the attractiveness of Islington schools to prospective pupils and parents.
- It was explained that although there were sufficient school places for children in Islington, parents often wished to choose the school their child attended and this was not always possible. It was commented that some parents objected to their child not attending their nearest school, however it was suggested that the relatively short distances that Islington children had to travel to school would be considered acceptable in other major cities in the world.
- The Executive Member was keen to make capital investments in good and outstanding schools to increase the number of available places.
- The problem of school attendance was highlighted; one in thirteen children missed one day of school per fortnight. It was suggested that schools could better integrate their attendance strategies to deal with this issue.
- The Executive Member considered that too many children were in alternative provision and expressed concern that this often led to unsatisfactory outcomes for children. It was explained that attainment was higher in traditional education settings, however it was equally recognised that keeping children in schools which were not suitable for them was not appropriate. It was suggested that young people in alternative provision needed a clear vision of how their life would develop and the Committee was invited to consider this matter further.
- A member raised that children in alternative provision often had complex needs and may come from families with substance abuse or medical issues. The Executive Member clarified that he understood the difficult situation faced by providers of alternative provision; however it was not acceptable that 41% of young offenders had previously been in alternative provision.
- It was queried why four out of ten pupils were not achieving five A*-C grade GCSEs including English and Maths at age 16. The Executive Member explained that there was no straightforward answer however contributing factors could include overcrowded housing and limited access to ICT at home.
- Reference was made to the presentation made by the Director of Schools and Young People's Services at the previous meeting, in which it was suggested that students with low levels of attainment were best supported through raising overall teaching and learning standards, as opposed to focusing support on

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demographic groups with particularly low levels of attainment. The Executive Member reaffirmed that this was considered to be the best method of raising attainment. A debate was had on this; and reference was made to Saturday schools previously provided for BME pupils which were considered to be successful.

- The Executive Member supported the early help approach in terms of both improving outcomes for families and leading to savings in the long term. However, it was suggested that further work was required to intervene earlier in child health matters. It was commented that the Council should encourage greater use of early intervention approaches among its partners.
- It was suggested that the Health and Wellbeing Board had not yet focused on child health and further work in this area would be welcomed.
- The Executive Member compared the Council's social care performance to that of other local authorities. It was advised that, following a difficult inspection of the Council's youth offending service, a new service structure had been implemented. It was hoped this would reduce levels of knife crime in particular.
- Following a question, it was advised that levels of youth re-offending were comparable with other inner London boroughs, however the Borough did not perform as well as its statistical neighbours. It was noted that the rate of youth re-offending in Islington was decreasing, however not at the same pace as other areas. The Executive Member recognised that improvement in this area was needed and advised that he would be visiting other local authorities to learn more about best practice, including restorative justice schemes.
- In response to a question, it was advised that school governors were best placed to challenge head teachers on performance at GCSE level.
- In response to a question about why children in care do not perform as well as their peers at GCSE level, it was advised that these children faced a range of difficulties and the Corporate Parenting Board was investigating how the attainment of children in care could be improved. It was noted that children who had been in care for a longer period of time tended to have better educational outcomes, and for that reason work was being carried out to minimise the length of time it takes for care decisions to be made.
- The Executive Member advised that he would circulate data relating to any trends in the crimes of young offenders and first time offenders in particular.
- Following a question from a member of the public, it was advised that the Council found it difficult to influence education at AS and A2 level as many local children received this education outside of the Borough.

The Chair thanked Councillor Caluori for his attendance.

55 ADDITIONAL DOCUMENT FOR INFORMATION: ISLINGTON'S EARLY HELP INDEPENDENT EVALUATION - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (ITEM NO. B4)

Noted.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.40 pm

Chair