

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Tuesday, 12 April 2016

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Tuesday, 12 April 2016 at 7.30 pm.

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

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

Also Present: **Councillors:** Caluori

Councillor Kaya Comer-Schwartz in the Chair

120 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. A1)**
None.

121 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. A2)**
None.

122 **DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. A3)**
None.

123 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (ITEM NO. A4)**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 3 March 2016 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

124 **CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. A5)**
None.

125 **ITEMS FOR CALL IN (IF ANY) (ITEM NO. A6)**
None.

126 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. A7)**
None.

127 **EDUCATION IN ISLINGTON 2015: ANNUAL REPORT (ITEM NO. B1)**
Lauren Pang, Head of Information and Performance, and Mark Taylor, Director of Learning and Schools, presented the report which provided an overview of education performance in 2015.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The council compared education performance against Inner London and national averages. The report indicated strong overall performance and a high quality of education provision. All secondary schools were judged as good or better by Ofsted and all primary and secondary schools were above national floor standards.
- It was noted that the percentage of pupils achieving five or more A* to C grade GCSEs including English and Maths had dropped by two percentage points

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compared to the previous year, however this measure varied significantly between schools.

- Islington schools were 6th best in the country for the proportion of disadvantaged pupils achieving five or more A* to C grade GCSEs including English and Maths. It was noted that 'disadvantage' was defined by the Department for Education as including pupils eligible for free school meals, who had been looked after, or who had been adopted from care.
- There had been a continued improvement in attendance and overall levels of absence had reduced, however persistent primary school absence was above the national average.
- Following an enquiry on the work to halve the rate of NEETs to 2.2%, it was advised that the council had achieved this by re-focusing its service on the basics of supporting the young people most in need at the right time.
- The Committee commented that the rate of primary exclusions was above Inner London and England averages. It was advised that as Islington had a relatively small population for an education authority and therefore exclusions had a significant impact on the borough's overall exclusion rate. Some pupils had been excluded from multiple primary schools.
- Members queried the varying performance levels of local schools. Officers commented that although schools did have different cohorts, they were not sufficiently different to explain variations in performance. It was suggested that changes in school leadership had impacted on the performance of some schools. It was also noted that the quality of school support mechanisms was not consistent and the council was monitoring this to ensure that pupils were accessing the most effective interventions.
- The Committee commented on the decrease in GCSE performance at Highbury Grove School and queried if the reported £200,000 shortfall in the school's finances could lead to redundancies. In response, the Executive Member advised that this was a matter for the school's governing body, however it was understood that the school's finances had been affected by pension and national insurance changes and the council was liaising with the school and unions to ensure a coordinated and balanced approach. Officers advised that other schools may experience the same difficulties, however noted that this could not excuse a decrease in performance.
- It was queried if the council would consider taking a political position on compulsory redundancies in schools. In response, it was advised that the council had not previously taken a political position however had supported the redeployment of staff.
- Early years performance had improved, however was still below the national average. The Committee commented that Islington's performance was broadly moving in line with the national average and further work was required to narrow the performance gap. It was suggested that improvements could be achieved by increasing the number of two year olds accessing early years education.
- Although the performance of looked after pupils significantly exceeded the national average, the Executive Member commented that further improvement was needed. The Committee noted the role of the Corporate Parenting Board and the intention to appoint a governing body for Islington's Virtual School.
- The Committee queried the risks posed by the government proposal to convert all maintained schools to academies. In response, the Executive Member advised that the level of risk would not be fully known until draft legislation was published; however there was a significant risk that academy schools would not work in partnership through the Islington Community of Schools and would not engage with the council in supporting vulnerable pupils and achieving education improvement.

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- A member queried if a school-by-school analysis of the performance gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and the remainder of the cohort could assist in identifying the most effective use of pupil premium funding.
- It was noted that the free school meals attainment gap was narrowing and Islington had one of the smallest attainment gaps in the country.
- The Committee noted that English Baccalaureate performance was higher than the national average and Islington was in the top third of all local authorities.
- A member of the public queried if the council would consider establishing its own academy trust in response to the government proposal to convert all maintained schools to academies. In response, it was advised that the council would be campaigning against academisation. Whilst co-operative academy trusts were being explored in areas such as Brighton and Sheffield, this was not an option being considered at present.

The Committee thanked the officers for their attendance.

128 **INFORMATION ITEM: THE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF BME CHILDREN (ITEM NO. B3)**

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Committee queried if there was an explanation of why mathematics results appeared to vary depending upon ethnic background and in particular the attainment levels of Black Caribbean pupils. It was advised that officers would look into the details further and report back to members.
- Members noted the relatively higher attainment of Somali and Bangladeshi pupils. It was commented that some local mosques provided supplementary Maths and English classes to children and there was a lack of such community-led education for children of other ethnicities. Members considered if the council should work with the voluntary sector to support community-led supplementary education for children from certain ethnic backgrounds. It was queried if the appointment of 'Community Champions' would be effective.
- It was queried if more could be done to raise awareness of demographic achievement trends among parents and if strategies which reflected the particular needs of different ethnic groups were required.
- Members commented on the need to approach such issues tactfully and queried the best way in which to have difficult conversations on demographic trends with parents.
- Members commented that the council's general approach to attainment was to raise standards universally, however it was queried if this was sufficient to improve the attainment of pupils from all backgrounds.
- The Committee queried if pupil attainment changed at the onset of puberty and requested that the data be analysed by gender as well as ethnicity.

RESOLVED:

That further analysis of attainment by ethnicity and gender be circulated to members.

129 **ALTERNATIVE PROVISION: NOTES OF SCRUTINY VISITS AND CONCLUDING DISCUSSION (ITEM NO. B2)**

(a) Notes of Scrutiny Visits

It was commented that the visits had been useful and it was particularly valuable to speak with pupils about their experiences.

(b) Concluding Discussion

The Committee had a concluding discussion on the evidence received through the Alternative Provision scrutiny. The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Committee considered which pupils should be in alternative provision and if alternative provision was being utilised properly. It was commented that although some provisions provided niche education to pupils with a particular set of needs, there was a concern that some schools were too ready to take pupils out of mainstream education and refer them to provisions with an insufficient focus on academic attainment.
- It was suggested that increasing the involvement of schools in the referral process would introduce an element of peer review. It was thought that this could reduce the number of pupils referred to alternative provision.
- Members noted that schools were responsible for referring pupils to alternative provision and did not have to make use of the council's service. It was queried how schools could be incentivised to keep low performing and disruptive pupils in mainstream education.
- The Committee considered the evidence that several alternative provision pupils had learning needs identified after referral and suggested that a standardised and comprehensive method of assessment was required to identify the needs of pupils. It was noted that this would also assist in improving the quality of data held by the council. Officers commented that the council would not be able to specify the type of assessments carried out by all providers and there was not sufficient resources for the council to carry out such assessments in-house. Members suggested that such referrals could be carried out by schools prior to referral.
- Members considered the appropriateness of functional skills qualifications and the availability of GCSEs to alternative provision pupils. It was thought that some providers excessively focused on pupil expectations as opposed to aspirations and this could be to the detriment of some pupils. A discussion was had on if the purpose of alternative provision was to provide alternative qualifications or to provide mainstream qualifications in an alternative setting. It was concluded that functional skills were generally not as valued as GCSEs and that all pupils should have the opportunity to study for GCSEs. It was suggested that the council should set the target of all children achieving at least a Grade C in GCSE English and Maths.
- The Committee noted the vulnerabilities of alternative provision pupils. It was commented that some pupils required mentoring and emotional support, some required educational support due to their learning needs, and others would benefit from programmes to inspire them and raise their aspirations. It was commented that some pupils did not appreciate the importance of education and further work was required to help these pupils identify appropriate pathways. Targeted interventions such as the 'Achievement for All' project were considered to be best practice.
- Members considered the role of early help services and the importance of the whole-family approach. Engaging parents in their child's education was thought to be key to improving outcomes.
- It was suggested that some alternative provision providers were experts in behaviour management and could provide training to teachers on the most effective ways to work with challenging pupils.
- The Committee expressed some concern that the majority of referrals were made at the time when pupils were considering their GCSE options and queried if predicted GCSE results was a factor in some referrals. Officers advised that referrals were usually made at this time for practical reasons and

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pupils should remain in mainstream education unless exceptional circumstances required referral to alternative provision. Schools should not consider predicted GCSE results as a factor in referrals.

- A member of the public queried if the Committee's review was consistent with the council's stated objective to reduce the number of pupils referred to alternative provision. In response, it was clarified that the committee did not support the deletion of alternative provision and the review was seeking to both make alternative provision more effective and reduce the demand for alternative provision.
- It was queried if the council could incentivise schools to retain pupils by delegating the budget for alternative provision referrals to schools. In response, it was noted that schools already paid the full cost of alternative provision for Year 10 students and the council only paid a supplement towards Year 11 pupils.
- The Committee considered that schools required a more positive attitude to alternative provision. Alternative provision should not be used as a threat, otherwise pupils considered that they were a failure as a result of their referral. It was thought that alternative provision should instead be considered as a fresh start.
- Following a query on providing information to parents, it was advised that parents received a report on their child's progress every half term. It was noted that the response from parents to alternative provision was mixed.
- Members considered if it was appropriate to provide alternative provision pupils with a route back to mainstream education. As alternative provision was only used for Key Stage 4 pupils in Islington, it was thought that referral back to mainstream school could disrupt the pupil's studies for GCSEs or other qualifications, particularly if their school and alternative provision provider offered differing qualifications or was working to different syllabuses. However, it was suggested that those who were persistently absent from alternative provision should be referred back to their mainstream school.
- It was suggested that pupils attending provisions which did not offer GCSEs could be offered an opportunity to study for GCSEs at their mainstream school either after school or one day a week.
- The Committee considered the innovate approaches of alternative provision providers, including banning certain items from lunches, focusing on exercise and health as a means of improving behaviour and pupil wellbeing, implementing strict boundaries for pupils that need them, and providing emotional support through non-teaching staff.
- A member of the public commented on the importance of life-long learning and noted that GCSEs were able to be obtained post-16 if pupils studied functional skills qualifications at Key Stage 4.

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REVIEW OF WORK PROGRAMME (ITEM NO. B4)

Noted.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.10 pm

Chair