

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Tuesday, 9 January 2018

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Tuesday, 9 January 2018 at 7.00 pm.

Present: Councillors: Debono (Chair), Wayne (Vice-Chair), Gallagher and Ismail

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

Also Present: Councillor Caluori

Councillor Theresa Debono in the Chair

272 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. A1)

Apologies for absence were received from councillors Spall and Ngongo. Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Gallagher.

273 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. A2)

None.

274 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. A3)**

None.

275 CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. A5)

The Chair advised of two proposed scrutiny visits as part of the Vulnerable Adolescents scrutiny review. It was advised that further information would be circulated to members of the Committee after the meeting.

276 ITEMS FOR CALL IN (IF ANY) (ITEM NO. A6)

None.

277 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. A7)

None.

VULNERABLE ADOLESCENTS SCRUTINY REVIEW - WITNESS EVIDENCE
(ITEM NO. B1)

Laura Eden, Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, made a presentation to the Committee which explained how a vulnerable child may progress from early help services to statutory services as their needs escalate.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- 31% of children accessing early help services were between 11 and 15 years old.
- Families accessing early help services may be referred to other professionals such as an employment advisor or GP. Early help services were also able to advocate on behalf of service users to other services and agencies. For example, early help workers could make representations to housing providers if a family has been served with an eviction notice.
- Young people accessing Children in Need services were asked about their views and experiences. This informed targeted interventions with their parents.
- Children in Need services had a wrap-around approach which was intended to reduce the stresses on parents.
- 370 children in 2017/18 had been the subject of a child protection plan. 75 of those were over ten years old. The number of adolescents subject to a child protection plan had increased 42% since 2014, and there had been a 33% increase in emotional abuse.
- 270 looked after children were between the ages of 10 and 18. This was an increasing population, and it was commented that practitioners needed to develop new skills to work with older children.
- In general, the council sought to place looked after children with a family member through an interim care order while services address parental issues. If parents did not agree to an interim care order, then the council would make an application to the court to take a child into care.
- In response to a question, it was advised that the agency which referred to the council most frequently was the Police. Education providers, health services and voluntary sector organisations also frequently made referrals to Children's Services. It was noted that there was a good uptake of safeguarding training and it was thought that gave professionals the confidence to make referrals.
- Officers suggested that universal services such as schools and GPs could be more effective in making referrals to Children's Services. These services were able to identify issues at a very early stage, and earlier referrals would result in earlier intervention and may prevent issues from becoming entrenched.
- It was queried if the council could do more to assist universal services in identifying issues and encourage earlier referrals. In response, it was emphasised that training is available and is well attended, however professionals working with children needed to have an appreciation of the wide range of issues that affect young people's behaviour and actions, and ask young people relevant questions to identify these issues.
- It was noted that referral rates had increased in recent years as there was an increased awareness of safeguarding matters.
- A member commented on how perpetrators of domestic violence controlled and coerced their victims; and how some women might be open about their experiences of domestic violence however would not seek help out of fear. It was queried if the council could do more to empower women to seek help. In response, it was advised that some of the most effective interventions worked with perpetrators on developing healthy relationships. It was commented that,

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - 9 January 2018

following a relationship breakdown, perpetrators may continue to be abusive in other relationships if they do not access support services.

- A member expressed concerns that resources were being directed to services for perpetrators of domestic violence while funding for services for victims, such as refugees, was being reduced. In response, it was advised that domestic violence interventions needed to engage with the victim, the perpetrator and any affected children. Whilst refuge services were valuable, the most positive outcome for the victim and any affected children was the perpetrator leaving the family home and addressing their behaviour.
- Following a question, it was advised that there were a number of success stories where women had been empowered to leave an abusive relationship. Sometimes couples would separate and both partners would go on to form healthy relationships. Officers commented that the most successful outcome was when both parents could continue to parent their children.
- It was noted that domestic violence could increase if victims chose to separate from their abusive partner.
- The Committee queried why the number of adolescents subject to a child protection plan had increased. In response officers thought that there was a variety of contributing factors, including increases in poverty, deprivation, and parental stresses. However, officers noted that the overall number of referrals was also increasing, and this was partially because Islington considered gang activity as a safeguarding issue. Some boroughs only considered gang activity as criminal behaviour.

The Committee thanked Laura Eden for her attendance.

Councillor Gallagher entered the meeting and it was noted that the Committee was quorate.

Naomi Bannister, CSE, Missing and Trafficking Coordinator, and Sarah Whelan, Gangs and Serious Youth Violence Coordinator, made a presentation to the Committee on the work of the Exploitation and Missing service, with a particular focus on child sexual exploitation, missing children, gangs, and serious youth violence.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Council used the same definitions of missing and absent as the Metropolitan Police. Over the previous year 177 children had gone missing from home over 372 missing episodes. 161 children had gone missing from care over 1,000 episodes. Although children in care were more likely to go missing, it was also suggested that data for children missing from care was more accurate as these children were already working with council services. It was known that some parents did not alert the police the first time that their child went missing.
- Boys were more likely to go missing than girls, although not by a significant majority.
- The majority of missing children returned home within 24 hours, but those at risk of exploitation or involved in gangs tended to go missing for longer periods, and could be missing for up to two weeks.
- The service used the DfE definitions of child sexual exploitation. The majority of child sexual exploitation victims in Islington were female.
- The majority of people on the gangs matrix were aged over 18. The majority of those were male.
- 11 children had been identified as being directly involved in county lines drug dealing.

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - 9 January 2018

- Officers commented that they were seeking to develop a more holistic response to exploitation and missing children, as there was a crossover between young people involved in gangs, serious youth violence, child sexual exploitation, and young people who go missing.
- A member suggested that greater engagement with parents at an earlier stage may help in reducing the number of young people involved in gangs and serious youth violence. Officers commented that the council's early help services sought to work proactively with parents.
- A member noted that six looked after children were involved in county lines drug dealing, and asked if these children had been looked after for a long period, or if they had only recently become looked after. In response, it was advised that all six had entered the care system as adolescents and were already at risk of gang involvement at the time they entered care. Officers commented that those who entered care as young children tended to have more positive outcomes.
- In response to a question, it was advised that most children involved in county lines drug dealing were not in education, employment or training. Most had been known to children's social care for a significant amount of time, and had experienced domestic violence or other trauma earlier in their lives. It was advised that gang membership provided these young people with a sense of belonging which they may not have at home.
- A member commented that Safer Neighbourhood Teams may have useful intelligence on young people at risk of gang activity and suggested that further engagement with these officers could be helpful. It was noted that young adolescents may start their gang involvement as a drug mule before progressing to serious youth violence. For this reason, it was important to engage with these children as early as possible, before their gang involvement became entrenched. Officers advised that the council and police did monitor young people at risk of gang activity, including siblings of known gang members.
- It was noted that the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee had previously reviewed knife crime and mobile phone theft and this had made recommendations to encourage greater joined up working.
- It was suggested that parents needed to be empowered to question their children on their sources of income, and how they acquired a new moped, mobile phone, or other items.
- Officers noted the St Giles Trust engaged ex-gang members with young people to deter them from gang activity. It was commented that this was particularly useful for young people who did not yet meet the threshold for children's social care intervention.
- The Committee queried what a successful early intervention approach to exploitation and missing children would look like, and if there was anything holding the council back from fully implementing such an approach. In response, it was advised that the integrated gangs team primarily focused on young people on the gang matrix, however an early intervention approach would involve more coordinated work with young people at risk of gang involvement.
- The gang matrix was a police system of the most prolific gang associated young people. These young people were involved in violent crime and as a result were the subject of enhanced surveillance and enforcement.
- Although further early intervention would be beneficial, officers commented that they thought the council and police appropriately balanced enforcement and engagement with young people.
- It was commented that local communities knew which young people were involved in gangs, and further community engagement may be beneficial. Although county lines drug dealing was now receiving an increased focus, it

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - 9 January 2018

was not a new development and the term “going country” had been used for many years. It was suggested that information on missing children was posted to social media more readily than it was reported to the police.

- The Committee noted the low number of males at risk of child sexual exploitation, only 1 in every 22 referrals was for a male. It was queried how information on males was recorded, as it could be that they were both a perpetrator and victim of sexual exploitation if they were coerced into the sexual activity as part of a gang initiation. Officers acknowledged this was an issue, however noted that there were very few disclosures from young males. Information on the sexual exploitation of young males tended to be reported by other people who may have seen a video of the incident. Videos of such incidents were used to blackmail gang members and were occasionally circulated around schools.
- It was commented that young men tended not to perceive themselves as victims of abuse and were more likely to make disclosures later in life.
- The Committee considered the difficulties of collecting evidence of child sexual exploitation. Although video footage of gang-related incidents may be stored on mobile phones, the Police were unable to seize phones without a reason to do so.
- It was commented that young people and parents who discover videos of child sexual exploitation are unable to share them without committing an offence and often do not know what to do. Officers reiterated that anyone who has discovered a video of abuse should report it to the Police.
- The council and local police did not scan social media for intelligence, instead this was carried out by the National Crime Agency.
- A member suggested that more needed to be done to encourage young people to make disclosures of exploitation.

The Committee thanked Naomi Bannister and Sarah Whelan for their attendance.

Gabriella Di-Sciullo, Head of Admissions and Children Out of School, made a presentation to the Committee on exclusion and absence from education.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Islington offered schools a wide range of support services. This included training services and interventions to try and prevent exclusions. These made use of trauma informed practices and focused on why young people may exhibit poor behaviour at school.
- Poor behaviour at school could be an indicator of the child having a problematic home life. In general, the council did not work directly to address pupil behaviour, but supported schools in developing their own behaviour management practices. This was a more sustainable approach.
- There had been 29 exclusions in the 2017/18 academic year to date.
- Officers noted concerns about children carrying weapons. There were 9 weapon related permanent exclusions in 2016/17. The council had worked with schools to ensure that pupils caught with a weapon were referred to children's services. This triggered a family risk assessment. It was commented that a child carrying a weapon could indicate that the child was at risk of harm and was in need of protection.
- Officers commented that children carrying weapons was a serious issue, however they did not wish to criminalise young people and deny them educational opportunities exclusively as a result of carrying a weapon. Some schools had a zero tolerance approach and chose to permanently exclude all young people carrying weapons, but they were not required to do so. Officers commented that some schools made decisions to exclude or not based on the

circumstances of the incident. Sometimes pupils transferred school, rather than being excluded.

- A member of the Committee commented that local communities were alarmed by recent knife crime incidents and would wish for all schools to adopt a zero tolerance approach.
- Officers advised that young people were concerned about knife crime and tended to report knife possession to teachers in school.
- There had been a significant reduction in the number of school age offenders. All young offenders had a post-16 plan and their progress was monitored. An 'Achiever of the Month' prize was available, but was not always awarded.
- Officers commented that developing the Secondary Securing Education Board had been a challenge, however the Board now worked very effectively. Officers considered that it was very positive that head teachers and others could collectively take decisions on the education of 'hard to place' young people. Schools were required to present their case for seeking a pupil transfer to the Board. It was thought that this had led to more robust decision-making.
- A member commented that some parents observed their child's behaviour deteriorating following a referral to a pupil referral unit. Officers advised that referrals to the PRU were only made as a last resort, however acknowledged that outcomes for pupils were mixed.
- Children's Services worked with Housing to ensure that children in temporary accommodation were able to access education. All young people in temporary education had a place at a school.
- The Committee noted how Children's Services sought to locate pupils missing from education. Sometimes families would leave the borough without informing their school. In these instances, social care would attempt to establish their whereabouts. This could include messaging family members through WhatsApp, or contacting border agencies. If it was advised that a pupil was attending school in another country, Children's Services would seek confirmation from their new school. The council had received positive feedback on its processes from a school in Hong Kong.
- Members asked why families with children would move without informing anyone. In response, it was advised that there were a variety of reasons for this, although often a family emergency would result in children leaving the country at short notice.
- Further work was required to reduce levels of persistent absence.

The Committee thanked Gabriella Di-Sciullo for her attendance.

279 UPDATE ON THE ISLINGTON FAIR FUTURES COMMISSION (ITEM NO. B2)

Tania Townsend, Children's Partnership Development and Strategy Manager, introduced the report which provided an update on the progress of the Fair Futures Commission.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Other authorities had expressed an interest in the Commission and had asked officers for advice on establishing their own commission. The GLA had expressed a particular interest, as it was considering how to make London a child-friendly city.
- The Commission had received a significant amount of evidence from young people. This included marginalised young people with 'hidden voices' such as young carers and LGBTQIA young people.

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - 9 January 2018

- The Commission's work had focused on three themes; power, place and possibilities.
- Young people had given commissioners a tour of the borough and provided their views on the local environment. A place summit had been held to consider how places and spaces could be designed to better meet the needs of young people. It was commented that the voices of children and young people were often absent in planning and development discussions.
- Young people felt like they were being forgotten and were not benefitting from gentrification.
- Young people had said that schools should have a greater role in teaching social skills, employability skills, and conflict resolution, and preparing them for adult life.
- It was commented that national policies were intensifying challenges for young people and families on low and middle incomes.
- Young people had said they loved Islington and valued its social mix and diversity. However, young people were also concerned about their safety.
- Young people felt that services focused on the risks to young people and engaged with them in a negative way, rather than focusing on their assets and strengths.
- The findings of the Commission were due to be reported to the Council meeting on 22 February 2018. An implementation plan would then be developed. Whilst there was only limited funding to provide additional or enhanced services, it might be that services can work differently to better meet the needs of young people.

The Committee thanked Tania Townsend for her attendance.

RESOLVED:

That the progress of the Fair Futures Commission be noted.

280

QUARTERLY REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE (Q2 2017/18) **(ITEM NO. B3)**

Carmel Littleton, Corporate Director of Children's Services, introduced the report which summarised Children's Services performance in quarter 2 2017/18.

The Committee noted the work underway to increase the registration of families with children aged under five at Children's Centres. It was commented that early childhood services were being restructured and a different approach may lead to an increase in registration. Work was also underway to improve the take up of two year old funded places.

It was explained that placement stability had been affected by older children in care moving placement.

To improve the recruitment of childminders a 'speed networking' session had been held. Officers advised that there were vacancies available for children, but there was insufficient choice.

RESOLVED:

- (i) That Children's Services performance in Quarter 2 2017/18 be noted;
- (ii) That the changes to KPIs, as set out in the report submitted, be noted.

281 EXECUTIVE MEMBER QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. B4)

The Committee noted the written update circulated in the agenda pack.

282 REVIEW OF WORK PROGRAMME (ITEM NO. B5)

Noted.

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

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 28 November 2017 be agreed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.40 pm

Chair