

London Borough of Islington
Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Monday, 24 November 2014

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Monday, 24 November 2014 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Ward (Vice-Chair), Donovan, Ngongo, Poyser, Turan, Ward, Wayne and Hamitouche (Substitute) (In place of Comer-Schwartz)

Also Present: **Councillors** Caluori

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

Councillor Nick Ward in the Chair

18 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. A1)**
Apologies were received from Councillor Comer-Schwartz.

19 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. A2)**
There were no declarations of interest.

20 **DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. A3)**
Councillor Hamitouche for Councillor Comer-Schwartz.

21 **MINUTES (ITEM NO. A4)**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2014 be confirmed and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

22 **CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. A5)**
There was no Chair's report.

23 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. A6)**
In relation to the Islington Safeguarding Children's Board item, a member of the public asked how the number of children with protection plans in Islington compared to the figures for statistical neighbours. An officer replied that in Islington there were fewer children with protection plans.

24 **ISCB ANNUAL REPORT (ITEM NO. B1)**
Alan Caton, Independent Chair of the Islington Safeguarding Children Board presented the report.

In the discussion the following points were made:

- The Board comprised of representatives from a number of agencies.
- As part of the Board's quality assurance assessments a multi-agency audit of 10 children previously subject to a child protection plan for neglect was undertaken.
- The Board would continue to work to identify children at risk of sexual exploitation. The identification of possible or actual cases of child sexual exploitation had increased from 68 to 96 children/young people as a result of raised awareness and training.

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- Agencies worked well together to protect the welfare of children in Islington. Work would be undertaken to ensure each child's voice was heard and to involve more agencies in the work of the Board.
- Monitoring e-safety was a challenge. Training and awareness raising took place, often in schools and parents were given advice.
- The Child Death Overview Panel met quarterly to review all child deaths and observe any patterns. The numbers of child deaths in Islington were small. The figures formed part of the pan-London figures.
- Alan Caton explained that safeguarding was the responsibility of everyone. It was important that the voice of the child was being heard and fed into service provision and that functions were properly resourced in order to safeguard children. Islington had good provision for helping to identify and deal with issues at an early stage.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

25

SCRUTINY REVIEW - IMPACT OF EARLY HELP ON PREVENTING ESCALATION TO STATUTORY SERVICES - PRESENTATION AND SID (ITEM NO. B2)

Ruth Beecher, Service Manager for Early Help for Families presented the report on the impact of early help on preventing escalation to statutory services.

In the presentation and discussion the following points were made:

- Early Help services sat above those universally available and below statutory intervention.
- The intention of Early Help was to identify and respond to families before problems escalated and required specialist or statutory services.
- Effective early help relied upon local agencies working together to: 1) identify children and families who would benefit from early help; 2) undertake an assessment of the need for early help and; 3) provide targeted early help services to address the assessed needs of a child and their family which focussed on activity to significantly improve the outcomes for the child.
- Working together improved outcomes for children and should be evidenced based. Professionals should be alert to the potential need for early help for a child who: 1) was disabled or had specific additional needs; 2) had special educational needs; 3) was a young carer; 4) was showing signs of engaging in anti-social or criminal behaviour; 5) was in a family circumstance which presented challenges for the child, such as substance abuse, adult mental health, domestic violence and or 6) was showing early signs of abuse and/or neglect.
- Cuts affecting public services created more pressure for families and could make them more vulnerable.
- The Troubled Families Programme started in 2012. In its first phase, local authorities were required to engage families with multiple problems defined nationally in relation to: 1) crime and antisocial behaviour; 2) poor school attendance and 3) adults in the family who received out-of-work benefits. Local factors such as health problems, domestic violence and substance misuse were included.
- The Troubled Families Programme would be expanded in April 2015. As well as continuing the work undertaken in the first phase, it would also reach out to families with a broader range of problems, including those affected by domestic violence and abuse, those with younger children who required help and those physical and/or mental health problems.
- Islington established a community budget in 2011. The budget included pooled resources in cash and in kind from the council, NHS Islington, Job Centre Plus, Probation, Police, Housing and the voluntary sector.

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- Families First was commissioned under the community budget approach. It provided one consistent service for school aged children across the borough. Families First worked with families. They visited them, helped with parenting and offered practical, hands on help.
- Islington Families Intensive Team (IFIT) was an early help team which provided intensive multi-disciplinary support to families in danger of losing their homes or where a child was at risk of being taken into custody.
- Internationally proven parenting programmes which lasted from 3-12 weeks were used in Islington and these worked well.
- Work was undertaken to encourage services to work together and offer joined up support. The aim was to provide services which wrapped around families and reduced the number of agencies involved wherever possible. The family had a keyworker or lead professional who drew in other specialist support if needed.
- Islington's Children's Services Contact Team (CSCT) was the single point of contact for requests for services for vulnerable children and young people in the borough and was introduced in April 2013.
- There were 1,000 new referrals to Families First in 2013/14.
- Many families felt isolated and required support to build social networks and support networks.
- There were too few referrals for families in which young people showed signs of engaging in anti-social or criminal behaviour and work was taking place to try and increase the numbers. Referrals from Housing had doubled in the first six months of 2014/15 with many young people referred because they were at risk of antisocial behaviour. This indicated that Housing work to improve early identification was working.
- 91% of the families referred to IFIT engaged with the intervention. Consideration would be given to how other services could learn from IFIT.
- There was a need to do more work in schools at a time when schools were becoming more independent.
- The government's expectation was that 100% of Islington's 815 families would be 'turned around' by May 2015. The majority of the remaining 271 had entrenched and complex difficulties and the national team had been informed that Islington, like many London authorities, would struggle to reach 100%.
- Monitoring and evaluating the early help services was resource intensive. A balance had to be reached between measuring what made a difference and investment in sufficient frontline resources to meet needs.
- Consideration would be given to how all public services in the borough could be further encouraged to 'think child, think parent, think family' so that early identification and prevention prevented crises, encouraged good outcomes for all children and avoided unnecessary escalation to costlier services later on.
- If a family was not engaging, work was undertaken to have a joined up approach and look at the work that had been done with the family and whether other communication methods could be used e.g. phone calls, letters, unannounced visits. Often there was an individual the family would engage with and this person could encourage the family to engage. Services were tailored to each family.
- Work was taking place to streamline processes and share good practice.
- More work would be undertaken to encourage agencies across Islington to work together. This would include the police and probation service.
- The community budget had meant funding had been rolled forward for three years. This would enable the service to continue even though there had been cuts to some funding.
- The council had committed to Early Help Services and it was hoped that services could continue and outcomes be measured.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

26

**IMPACT OF THE PUBLIC LAW OUTLINE ON SECURING A FAMILY FOR LIFE
(ITEM NO. B3)**

Cathy Blair, Director, Targeted and Specialist Children and Joy Nield, Head of Service, Targeted and Specialist Children gave a presentation which informed members about the local authority's role to identify and protect children from significant harm and outlined the child's journey through the provision of services from early help to protection. In a minority of cases, this meant separation from birth parents and long term alternative care which could include adoption.

In the presentation and discussion the following points were made:

- The Family Justice Review was published in 2011 and identified the need for wide ranging reforms to improve decision making for children involved with the courts. The main reforms related to reducing avoidable delay in the court process. Reasons for this delay included repeated requests by solicitors for more assessment, dependence on expert evidence, delays in identifying extended family members who could care for the child in the event the parents were unsuitable, delays in appointing guardians to represent the child and lack of continuity of the judiciary.
- In April 2014 the Department for Education revised the statutory guidance to provide a framework for preparing cases for court in order that sufficient evidence was available to enable decisions to be completed within 26 weeks.
- Where a child was subject to a child protection plan, Public Law Outline (PLO) pre-proceedings or Care Proceedings, they had been assessed as being 'at risk of significant harm'.
- Where it was agreed that the formal pre-proceedings PLO process should be followed, the social worker would encourage the family to seek legal advice and a 'Letter Before Proceedings' would be sent to the family explaining the Local Authority's concerns and setting out the expectations of the parents to avoid the need to issue court proceedings "giving the parents one last chance to improve their parenting". The family would be asked to identify all family members and friends who could support them and a Family Group Conference would be recommended so that the family could hear the concerns of the Local Authority and decide for themselves how to resolve them. This meant the family and friends would be identified as carers for the children should the parents not be able to do this in the longer term.
- Islington had 40 cases in PLO between March 2013 and April 2014 and 65% of these were diverted from court through intervention. The council sought to divert cases through intervention where possible.
- In the court process the Local Authority must prove on the balance of probabilities that the threshold criteria of significant harm is met and that an order is necessary to protect the child. The threshold is usually agreed by the court even when it is opposed by the parents. The court would then decide what interim order to make. It could make no order, an interim supervision order where the child would remain with the parents or an interim care order where the child might be removed from the parents, usually to family or friends carers or if there were none, foster carers.
- The 26 week timescale would only be met where the social worker had followed the PLO process diligently. In response to a question about whether the 26 week timescale had an impact on quality, an officer advised that the Family Plus team did not have as much time to focus on work as they would like. The timescale meant certain points might not come to light which would have done if the process was slower.

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- Increasingly the courts were not agreeing with the local authority about the type of interim order necessary, as they did not want to pre-emptively separate children from their birth parents. This resulted in more children remaining 'at risk' with their parents and increasing resources being used to support and monitor the families during the court process.
- Fewer court hearings were needed with an average of four per case compared to six before.
- In January 2013, Camden and Islington began the Bi-Borough Care Proceedings Project to work together and with key stakeholders to reduce unnecessary delay in care proceedings and work towards completing proceedings within 26 weeks.
- In 2011/12, the average duration of care proceedings was 54 weeks. Application of the best practice model had reduced this to 33 weeks (excluding 'legacy cases').
- There had been an increase in Interim Supervision Orders which resulted in more residential child and parent assessments and family support.
- There was not as much judicial continuity as was hoped, partly due to a shortage of court time and judges.
- Islington was part of the North London adoption consortium with five North London partner boroughs.
- The adoption score card was a data report of three year rolling averages of the performance of the local authority in relation to timescales for securing adoptive placements.
- The courts now agreed fewer children being placed for adoption and more being placed using Special Guardianship Orders with relatives and friends. The courts wanted adoption to be the last resort and considered that it was best to place children with extended family. The local authority had concerns about this and had raised it with the judiciary.
- The Chair of the National Adoption Leadership Board advised that if the local authority considered adoption to be the best option for a child, they should put this in the care plan and provide robust reasons and then let the court decide.
- A child's views were represented in court by the child's guardian.
- When a Special Guardianship Order was given, the child was no longer classified as in care. However, the families were still supported by the Family Plus team support which offered training, set up support groups and kept cases open as long as was considered necessary.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

27

WORK PROGRAMME 2014-15 (ITEM NO. B4)

In the discussion the following points were made:

- Members raised concern about the number of agenda items scheduled for 12 May 2015 meeting.
- Consideration was given to whether the Impact of SEN changes on Children and Families scrutiny review could be extended into the next municipal year. This would enable the committee to consider how well the new system had been embedded and allow the committee to focus on the Impact of Early Help on Preventing Escalation to Statutory Services this municipal year.
- It was suggested that more work could be undertaken outside of the committee e.g. by email.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Work Programme be noted.

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- 2) That the Vice-Chair report back to the Chair of the committee on the discussion on this item.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.20 pm

Chair