

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Monday, 9 March 2015

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 5, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Monday, 9 March 2015 at 7.30 pm.

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

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

Councillor Kaya Comer-Schwartz in the Chair

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

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

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

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

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 January 2015 be confirmed and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

39 **CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. A5)**
Attention was drawn to the circulated Early Help Scrutiny Work Programme, and in particular the witnesses that would be presenting to the Committee.

It was commented that a date was being sought for site visits and further information would be circulated to members in due course.

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

41 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. A7)**
The Chair outlined the procedure for public questions and the filming and recording of meetings.

42 **IMPACT OF EARLY HELP ON PREVENTING ESCALATION TO STATUTORY SERVICES: WITNESS EVIDENCE (ITEM NO. B1)**
The Committee received evidence from Elaine Sheppard, Operational Manager of Family Action, during which the following main points were made –

- Family Action is a voluntary organisation which works in partnership with the Council to deliver the Families First service.
- The Families First service had been designed to be easily accessible and delivered in a way which removes the stigma of accessing support services.

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- The service had three teams operating in the Borough on a geographical basis. Clients could be referred to the service by the Police, Social Services, Housing, health workers, schools, GPs and other agencies; however around 25% of users had self-referred to the service.
- As well as supporting existing clients, the service had also conducted outreach work which included visits to schools, drop-in sessions, and delivering parenting programmes in community venues.
- The service had taken a “whole family” approach to intervention, with a particular focus on children. Service users were provided with support inside the family home, or at a community venue if more appropriate.
- Ms Sheppard considered the partnership model to be particularly effective, as it has allowed the voluntary sector to work with the Council services most relevant to the particular family to devise a joint action plan. Families often had multiple and complex needs including educational attainment and attendance, social isolation, and difficulties with employment, housing and health, including mental health. Working in partnership had enabled Families First and Council services to take a consistent and coordinated approach with clients.
- Each family was assigned a family support worker. The role of the family support worker was to provide practical help, advice and support to the family, and challenge clients when needed.
- Clients and support workers jointly assessed the needs of the family on the “Family Star” assessment tool. This helps to identify the areas in which the family needs the most support and allows progress to be measured.
- The progress made by clients on the family star had also enabled the service to evaluate its own achievements. Through this tool, Families First was aware that it had been most successful in improving the safety of children, however further work was needed to improve the social networks of clients.
- The service had also used local authority data to evaluate its outcomes. The performance of the service was reviewed every six months and changes were made as required. Following a query, it was advised that the service had also received anecdotal information about client progress; however this was not collected or evaluated systematically.
- The service was considered successful, with the majority of clients making good progress on the family star. The service had received positive feedback from clients; in a recent telephone survey 83% clients scored the service as 4 out of 5 or higher for overall satisfaction.
- 68% of families engaging with the service had experienced a reduction in school absences.
- The service had exceeded its annual target of engaging with 1,000 families by the half-year point of 2014/15. Following a query, it was advised that the service was coping despite the high demand and the total number of clients was not expected to exceed 2,000 by year end.
- A member queried how the service compared with the early intervention programme offered before 2012, when Families First was established. Family Action considered that the current service was more effective in reaching the families with the greatest need and that the service was better coordinated than the previous offering due to the partnership approach.
- A member of the public queried how public sector budget cuts had impacted on the service. It was commented that the Families First budget had not been reduced, however changes and reductions in housing and welfare may have exacerbated problems for clients. Families First was confident that an increase in demand for its services could be accommodated through smart working and partnership work.
- The Chair queried the reasons why some service users had not scored Families First highly for overall satisfaction. Families First suggested that some families may have hoped for a better outcome, and some may have had

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unrealistically high expectations. Some feedback had suggested that staff had not been sympathetic enough.

- The welfare of Families First staff was queried, in particular if staff were suffering from “burnout”. In response, it was commented that management are supportive towards staff, and staff are given access to training and professional development opportunities.
- In response to a member query, it was commented that the service could innovate further by developing communications and networking between families, and undertaking further outreach work.

The Committee received evidence from Lucinda Hibberd-French, Deputy Service Manager with responsibility for the Families First service, during which the following main points were made –

- The importance of accessibility was emphasised. The Council offers a single point of contact for families requiring support; this method was considered to be efficient and less complex for service users, as they do not need to repeat information multiple times to different agencies. Once contact is made with a family, a judgement is made on which support service would be most suitable for the family.
- It was commented that Families First can uncover further, more complex issues through their work with families and then refer these to other agencies as appropriate. In particular, it was described how Families First can escalate cases to Social Services where more formal intervention is required, and how Social Services can de-escalate cases which require more generalised support to Families First. It was noted that families are consulted on escalation or referral, unless it is considered that this would put any children at risk.
- In cases where Social Services have de-escalated clients to Families First, a handover takes place in the form of a joint home visit to ensure continuity for service users.
- The Families First service aimed to complete any intervention within six months. This was achieved by families completing the family star assessment tool, and working to improve any areas in which the family scored below 5 on a scale of 1 to 10. Although intervention was intended to be completed within six months, families may access the service for longer if required. Some families had completed their intervention and then returned at a later date with different issues altogether. Those returning to the service had often self-referred and it was commented that this reflects on the positive experience the family has had with the service. No data was readily available on how many clients had returned to the service.
- Families First had uncovered instances of domestic violence. It was commented that this is a sensitive issue and family support workers had received relevant training. On uncovering a case of domestic violence, support workers undertake a risk assessment in order to determine if a MARAC (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference) is required. Support workers always seek to minimise the risk to victims. It was noted that, as well as support programmes for victims, there are also programmes available which seek to change the behaviour of perpetrators of domestic violence.
- In response to a query, it was commented that there was no backlog at the central referral point and Families First did not have a waiting list. Families First arrange a visit within three days of a referral, and the visit then takes place within a week.
- A member provided anecdotal evidence about particular cases of domestic violence. It was commented that although some services had experienced a decrease in funding, in recent years domestic violence services have sought a

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more systematic approach and the safety of victims was still the highest priority.

- It was explained that the self-referral process is not bureaucratic. There are no forms to complete by the client and contact may be made by email or telephone.
- It was explained that some families choose not to engage with Families First. The service has been persistent and followed up referrals multiple times; however families cannot be made to engage. It is possible to carry out unannounced home visits if there is a concern for the family's welfare.

The Committee received evidence from Mairead McDonnell, Deputy Head of Newington Green School, during which the following main points were made –

- Ms McDonnell is the school's designated teacher for safeguarding and is responsible for liaising with statutory and non-statutory agencies about safeguarding issues.
- Ms McDonnell praised the work of Families First, noting that their work was well coordinated and tailored to the needs of individuals and specific schools. It was noted that the service had established outreach coffee mornings and parenting groups, and Families First had attended school safeguarding meetings with other agencies.
- Each school was allocated a Families First link worker. It was suggested that this was well received by parents as it provides a "face" to the service.
- It was commented that the electronic form used for a school to refer a family to Families First was more detailed than form under the previous early intervention offering; however it was considered worthwhile as the service provided better outcomes for families. Examples were provided of particular families that had benefitted from the service.
- The school's opinion was that parents are happier to engage with Families First than Social Services as there was less stigma attached to the service.
- Families First had worked to stop families with housing issues being evicted, and had helped families with medical needs source funding.
- A member queried the accessibility of council services to schools. Ms McDonnell advised that the school had good relationships with council officers and knew who to contact about particular issues.
- It was queried if early intervention by Families First had led to successful resolution for families referred to the service by the school. It was commented that the majority of families referred to the service were turned around within the timeframe.
- The opinion of the school was that the Families First budget should be protected.
- A member of the public queried the staff turnover of Families First. It was noted that there had been some turnover of staff, however in general these had left for career progression. Turnover was not related to workload or stress.
- The Chair asked for Ms McDonnell to identify two weaknesses of the Families First service. The suggested weaknesses were that schools cannot receive information on families who have self-referred to the service, however the importance of confidentiality was accepted, and that the service was only open to Islington residents, as some families attending Islington schools were in need of support but were residents of neighbouring boroughs.

The Committee received evidence from Win Bolton and Michelle Tolfrey of the Camden and Islington Mental Health Foundation Trust, during which the following main points were made –

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- It was commented that there was a high prevalence of mental health disorders in the Borough and some clients of Families First require related support.
- Families First did not offer direct access to trained mental health practitioners and it was considered that this would replicate existing services. Instead, Families First had access to clinical psychologists, employed by the NHS, who were able to be consulted on the needs of service users and possible solutions. This was considered to enhance the service provided by Families First by developing the knowledge of mental health among its staff.
- Psychologists had been working with Families First since November 2013 and offered support on 400 cases in their first year. The services were co-located and had a successful working relationship. 70% of the work the psychologists carried out with Families First was indirect; however some visits to service user homes were carried out.
- It was thought that 46% of families engaging with the service had a mental health need. These were often complex needs and related to trauma. Some families had a history of not engaging with mental health services and therefore psychologists and Families First would consider how to improve the wellbeing of those in need without necessarily referring to specialist services. Sometimes this involved preparing the service user to engage with other services at a later date.
- There was no waiting list for support from the clinical psychologists.
- A member commented that although there was often good provision of mental health services for children and adults, there can be a gap in provision for young people making the transition into adulthood. This issue was recognised as a national problem by the Foundation Trust, and the Trust had recently introduced transition plans for service users moving from child to adult support services to address this problem.
- It was explained that Families First may refer to a number of services which can improve mental health, such as voluntary sector counselling services, Solace Women's Aid, and general practitioners. Support workers looked broadly at the services which may improve a client's wellbeing, and may suggest social groups for those with problems relating to social isolation, for example.
- Difficulties could arise when a client is referred to a service with a lengthy waiting list. In general, primary care services were easy to access, whereas more specialist services often had a waiting list. It was noted that Islington Clinical Commissioning Group was piloting primary care mental health services.
- A member queried how the effectiveness of the psychologist support to Families First was measured. It was recognised that this is difficult to evaluate as the psychologists did not frequently work with service users directly, however it was possible to undertake staff surveys, measure family wellbeing, and review how the recommendations of the clinical psychologists were being implemented.

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

43 **ANNUAL REPORT – EDUCATION IN ISLINGTON 2014 (LEARNING AND SCHOOL STANDARDS) (ITEM NO. B2)**

The Committee received a presentation from Mark Taylor, Director of Schools and Young People's Services, copy interleaved, during which the following main points were made –

- The importance of benchmarking the Council's education service was emphasised. Performance was considered in a national and London context and aims to exceed the performance of other inner London boroughs. It was

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noted that the performance of schools in London was generally higher than other areas of the country.

- Evaluating the performance of schools assists matters of education policy. In particular, it was considered that evaluation helps parents and governors to secure improvements in schools. Supporting governors was a particular priority of the Council as they are well placed to instigate school-led improvement.
- Islington was one of only six local authority areas in England where 100% of secondary schools are categorised as either good or outstanding.
- Although Islington schools were achieving good results, the Council could not afford to be complacent as there were still gaps in attainment between schools. Although there were differences between schools, these were not considered significant enough to merit the attainment gap.
- Attainment was also measured in terms of demography. In some schools attainment was a particular issue for white British pupils, whereas there were attainment issues in other schools among black Caribbean pupils.
- The Council aspired for every school to be good or outstanding. It was commented that the Islington Community of Schools allowed schools to share knowledge and learn from each other to achieve the best outcomes for local children. It was thought that schools were particularly interested in why the performance of particular departments varies between schools.
- Persistent absenteeism was being addressed and a target of 96% attendance in every school had been set. It was acknowledged that tackling this problem requires support from parents and governors.
- A member raised the underachievement of more able pupils, suggesting that an emphasis can be placed on helping less able pupils meet minimum standards in core subjects, as opposed to helping more able pupils achieve their full potential. It was agreed that all schools should ensure that there was an equal motivation for helping pupils of all abilities across a broad range of subjects.
- A member suggested that the 60% of pupils attaining five or more A* - C grades at GCSE level (including English and Maths) was not good enough and queried what mechanisms were in place to help schools improve. It was agreed that the attainment of different cohorts should not significantly vary and it was explained that training was given to help school governors challenge headteachers on these sorts of issues. Best practice in teaching was shared between headteachers at meetings held twice per half-term. It was noted that one meeting per half term was chaired by the local authority, and one meeting was chaired by a headteacher. It was emphasised that the most successful schools have headteachers engaged in teaching and learning.
- Following a query, it was confirmed that the best teachers may be placed in schools requiring improvement to increase performance.
- A member queried the attainment of BME pupils. It was commented that this was a complex issue and at the best schools there were insignificant gaps in attainment between pupils of different ethnicities. For this reason greater importance was now placed on improving teaching and learning standards as opposed to focusing resources on specific groups. However, engagement with parents and community groups can improve attainment. A member of the Committee suggested that primary school pupils of some ethnic groups may benefit from a specific programme to prepare them for secondary education.
- Following a query about teacher turnover in primary schools, it was advised that Islington did not have a problem with teacher recruitment as it was considered a desirable place to work. The turnover of teachers was attributed to teaching staff moving away from the Borough when starting a family and the Council was seeking to mitigate this issue by investing in professional development and making Islington a great place to work.

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- Following a query about young 'NEET' people, it was advised that although secondary schools had a statutory responsibility to provide careers education, the Council and local primary schools considered the reduction in NEET status to be a collective responsibility.

The Committee thanked Mr Taylor for his contribution.

44 FAMILIES FIRST SERVICE SPECIFICATION (ITEM NO. B3)

Noted.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.30 pm

Chair