

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Monday, 9 November 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 November 2015 at 7.30 pm.

Present: Councillors: Comer-Schwartz (Chair), Donovan, Ismail, Ngongo, Picknell, Ward and Wayne

Co-opted Member: James Stephenson, Secondary Parent Governor

Also Present: Councillors: Caluori

Councillor Kaya Comer-Schwartz in the Chair

77 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. A1)

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Erol Baduna.

78 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. A2)

None.

79 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. A3)

None.

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

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 September 2015 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

81 CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. A5)

The Chair advised that Item B2, Child Protection Annual Report, would be considered before Item B1, Alternative Provision: Witness Evidence.

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

None.

83 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. A7)

A member of the public queried if local schools were able to refer children to alternative provision as a means of improving their GCSE pass rates. The Executive Member confirmed that young people should be in mainstream schools as far as possible and the council only supported a referral to alternative provision when it was in the best interests of the child. It was commented that the reasons why children were referred to Alternative Provision would be explored as part of the scrutiny review.

84 CHILD PROTECTION ANNUAL REPORT (ITEM NO. B2)

Cathy Blair, Director of Targeted and Specialist Children's Services, answered questions on the report which provided an update on the council's safeguarding work.

- It was queried why some young people missing from care had not achieved good outcomes. In response it was advised that some of these young people had a history of offending and had entered the care system as older teenagers on remand in custody. It was noted that such young people were particularly difficult to stabilise.

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- Further to paragraph 4.7, the Committee queried the use of abduction notices. It was explained that such notices were served on adults who had exploitative and unhealthy relationships with missing children. Officers considered abduction notices to be a useful tool in disrupting inappropriate relationships.
- It was queried why officers believed the number of children missing from home was under-reported. It was suggested that parents did not always notify police when their child was missing, especially if this was a regular occurrence.
- The Committee queried if the key performance indicators detailed at 5.3 were sufficiently oriented towards outcomes for children. It was advised that Children's Services was also the subject of regular quality assurance audits which objectively measured performance and outcomes for children.
- It was queried if the 45 days allowed for children in need assessments to be carried out was excessively long. Officers commented that 45 days was a reasonable standard, and whilst some assessments took a shorter time, some family circumstances were complicated and took much longer to assess.
- The Committee noted that the council applied for court orders to protect children more often than most other boroughs and queried why this may be. It was explained that the high levels of deprivation in Islington, together with significant levels of domestic violence and substance abuse, meant that Islington had a relatively high number of children requiring protection and such orders were considered to be the best way to safeguard children. It was commented that the court almost always agreed with the authority's judgement that the child was at risk of significant harm and required protection.
- The Committee noted that the number of Looked After children who had to move more than three times during a year was comparable to the council's statistical neighbours and queried if this was positive or not. In response it was advised that there was a shortage in foster carers, and although moving was disruptive for children it was often required to achieve the best outcomes.
- The Committee noted that the council had started using secure accommodation orders to protect children from absconding for the first time in six years and queried the reasons for this. In response it was noted that such orders were often used to protect children at risk of sexual exploitation who required their liberty to be deprived to ensure their safety. It was emphasised that this was only used as a last resort and the council had to demonstrate to the court that the order was required and that no suitable alternatives were available. Officers commented that children's homes would be an appropriate alternative in some cases; however there were very few residential resources available and homes could be reluctant to accept children which presented a significant risk.
- The Committee queried the significance of not recording changes in child circumstances in chronologies as detailed in paragraph 6.7 of the report. It was explained that chronologies were very useful in monitoring outcomes for children and these should be updated by social workers as required.
- A discussion was had on the anxieties of social workers as described at paragraph 7.1. It was queried why social workers raised anxiety with regard to managing risk and workloads. In response it was advised that social work was high risk by nature and although social workers had a significant work load this was comparable to other London boroughs.
- The Committee noted the results of a recent audit, which found that the rationale for why decisions were made was only recorded in around two-thirds of cases. Officers agreed that further work was required to make improvements in this area.
- The Committee was encouraged by the work of the Pause programme, although questioned if the project would become self-funding as intended due

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to the complexities of working with women with multiple issues. It was advised that permanent solutions for babies taken into care were usually found quickly.

- It was requested that a further report on the Pause programme and 'Doing What Counts and Measuring What Matters' be reported to the Committee in June 2016.
- The Committee noted that the number of safeguarding contacts had remained stable over the past three years (11,688 in 2013; 11,730 in 2014; 11,766 in 2015) and commented that an increase may have been expected given the increasing number of high-profile child exploitation cases nationally. Officers advised that referrals had become more appropriate in recent years. Around a quarter of referrals were received from the Police, and around a quarter were related to domestic violence.
- A discussion was had on how the Committee could best scrutinise the council's child safeguarding activity in future. It was concluded that ensuring the safety of children was central to all work carried out by the Committee and progress reports would continue to be received annually. In addition, members would continue to regularly review safeguarding matters through the work of the Corporate Parenting Board and the CSE Working Group.
- A member of the public queried if the Government's Prevent Strategy and the council's Youth Crime Strategy had an impact on the council's safeguarding work. Officers commented that both strategies had significant implications for how the council protected vulnerable children and Children's Services had an important role to play in reducing offending and reducing the risk of children being drawn to terrorism. It was noted that the council had carried out assessments under the Prevent duty.

The Committee thanked Cathy Blair for her attendance.

RESOLVED:

That a further report on the Pause programme and 'Doing What Counts and Measuring What Matters' be reported to the Committee in June 2016.

85

ALTERNATIVE PROVISION: WITNESS EVIDENCE (ITEM NO. B1)

The Committee received evidence from two providers of Alternative Provision on the quality and range of local provision.

Anna Cain, Chief Executive and Head of the Boxing Academy, provided a summary of her work. A discussion was had during which the following main points were made:

- The Boxing Academy was based in Hackney and offered alternative education provision to pupils across North London at risk of exclusion due to violent or disruptive behaviour.
- The Boxing Academy was a small provider with charitable status. The curriculum included a minimum of five GCSEs alongside boxing which improved the fitness and discipline of pupils. The Academy also offered PSHE and helped pupils to develop life skills such as employability. Intervention work on personal difficulties was offered after school hours. The majority of pupils passed their GCSEs.
- Every pupil at the Academy had a personalised learning plan. There were only eight pupils per class, with each class having both a teacher and a support assistant. Some pupils attending the Boxing Academy had special educational needs and it was commented that Islington schools provided particularly good data to assist the Academy in this area.
- The Academy originated in Tottenham and promoted an inclusive 'family' atmosphere which was particularly conducive for intervention work. It was

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suggested that many pupils struggled in traditional settings and had a low view of mainstream education. The different environment and focus on 'tough love' and team-work was thought to assist the pupils in their learning.

- The Boxing Academy offered full time education. Pupils arrived at 9am for a 9.15am start and worked until 3pm. Those arriving late were subject to appropriate sanctions which could be either a physical challenge, such as push-ups, or a practical task such as washing up.
- All pupils studied GCSE English, Maths, ICT, RE and PE. Pupils also received lessons on topical issues; the Academy had recently held a lesson on the Prevent strategy and democracy, and had also been visited by the Territorial Army and a barrister, who taught pupils about the legal system.
- Pupils could arrive from 8am for a breakfast club. Pupils could stay at the Academy up to 4pm and after-school activities were provided regularly.
- A placement at the Academy cost £10,500 per year which included meals, school trips and uniforms. Transport was not usually provided however was considered in exceptional circumstances. Some pupils requiring support with attendance were collected from their homes by their mentors.
- The Academy had 40 pupils in total, including 18 Year 11s. 56% of the previous year's cohort achieved a C or higher in maths, one pupil achieved an A. All pupils had passed GCSE PE.
- The Academy had been approved to become an Alternative Provision free school and would soon be offering three additional GCSEs: science, a language, and a humanities subject.
- It was noted that five of the 40 pupils were girls and these tended to perform best academically. The Academy welcomed both boys and girls however girls were rarely referred to the Academy due to the emphasis on previously violent and disruptive pupils.
- It was commented that many Boxing Academy pupils had previously been excluded or at risk of exclusion from school due to their behaviour. Some pupils struggled to cope in larger classes and had behavioural difficulties since primary school. Some pupils had learning disabilities however had previously rejected support. Some pupils had difficult home lives including domestic violence and substance abuse.
- The Academy did not set traditional homework as it recognised that many pupils did not have an appropriate home environment to work in. It was also recognised that homework could be the cause of arguments between pupils and their parents. The Academy instead set additional work to be completed at an on-site homework club.
- After completing their GCSEs the majority of pupils enrolled in college, often studying sports-related subjects. However, some returned to their schools to study and in such instances schools had commented on their improved behaviour.
- The Committee noted that schools retained responsibility for pupils on Alternative Provision. The Boxing Academy reported weekly to schools on their pupils' progress and alerted the school to any concerns. Reports were also provided to the Youth Offending Service as required. Most schools and boroughs referring visited the Academy every term and it was emphasised to pupils that they had not been excluded. Pupils were often invited to attend their school's Year 11 Prom, which meant a great deal to the pupils.
- As with all local providers of alternative provision, the Academy was evaluated annually by the Quality Monitoring and Evaluation Team (QMET) of the North London Strategic Alliance, a partnership of North London local authorities which collaborated on Children's Services matters. The Academy welcomed evaluation as a means of securing improvement in the Alternative Provision sector.

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- The Committee noted that the Boxing Academy was intended for pupils with a violent or disruptive background and queried how the Academy approached working with difficult pupils. It was advised that before pupils enrolled the Academy spoke honestly to parents and pupils about the curriculum, teaching style, and the Academy's expectations. This allowed pupils and parents to determine if the Academy was right for them. The Academy offered pupils a 'clean slate' and did not take decisions based on previous poor behaviour. It was expected for all pupils to struggle at some stage; however the Academy provided intensive support to pupils and never used exclusion as a punishment. The Academy was flexible to the needs of its pupils, for example offering pupils with ADHD short breaks during classes. The Academy sought to develop the independence of pupils, which ultimately allowed them to take responsibility for their own learning and actions.
- In very rare circumstances the Academy referred pupils to other providers; however this was only used when pupils would not engage and all parties agreed the Boxing Academy was not suitable for the pupil.
- The Academy was questioned on the council's goal to reduce the number of pupils entering alternative provision. In response it was advised that although minimising the circumstances which led to young people requiring alternative provision would be welcome, the Academy would not support an arbitrary reduction as some pupils struggled in traditional school settings and required an alternative provision environment to succeed. It was speculated if schools needed better mechanisms to support pupils struggling with mainstream education.

Rebekah Westgate, Assistant Principal at BSix Brooke House Sixth Form College, provided a summary of her work. A discussion was had during which the following main points were made:

- BSix was a sixth form college based in Hackney which accepted 14-16 year olds as a form of alternative provision. Pupils on alternative provision participated in mainstream GCSEs and entry-level vocational courses. Almost all pupils passed their chosen courses.
- Pupils sitting GCSEs were able to choose either the STEM pathway or the Humanities pathway. Each pathway was comprised of five GCSEs, with both including English and Maths. It was suggested that a pathway environment helped alternative provision pupils to see an end goal to their education.
- The quality of BSix's provision was regularly evaluated. The college was rated 'good' by Ofsted in March 2013 and received a 'good' rating by the North London QMET in October 2014. BSix carried out additional internal quality reviews each year and these involved input from pupils.
- BSix offered full-time education from 9am to 3.30pm.
- The Committee queried the college's relationship to its school and local authority partners. It was advised that although this varied for each school and authority, schools were keen to ensure their pupils achieved to the best of their ability and took their duty of care to each pupil seriously.
- Once alternative provision pupils completed their courses they could choose to stay at BSix, studying a higher level course, or participating in the post-16 GCSE re-sit programme if required.
- It was advised that pupils referred to BSix for alternative provision often had additional emotional needs and some struggled to cope in a traditional education setting. Officers compared this to the background of those referred to the Boxing Academy and explained the importance of referring pupils to an appropriate provider following consultation with pupils and parents.
- A placement at BSix cost £6,500 per annum. It was advised that this was less than the Boxing Academy due to the larger class sizes at BSix.

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- BSix considered that alternative provision was essential for pupils who could not engage with mainstream education, however the importance of schools maintaining responsibility for their pupils and engaging with providers of alternative provision was emphasised.

The Committee thanked Anna Cain and Rebekah Westgate for their attendance.

86

EXECUTIVE MEMBER QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. B3)

Councillor Joe Caluori, Executive Member for Children and Families, provided an update to the Committee on his recent work. The Committee noted the procedure for Executive Member questions set out in the agenda and questioned the Executive Member on the following topics:

- Councillor Picknell queried how Islington Council assessed the risk of abuse posed to unaccompanied asylum seeking children both prior to their arrival in the borough, and once they arrived. In response Councillor Caluori advised that there were two methods through which asylum seeking children came to the borough; some were allocated to the borough from the national asylum seeking unit in Croydon; whereas others presented themselves to the council, sometimes with an adult or a solicitor advocating on their behalf. The council collected information on asylum seeking children, particularly to identify the journey taken into the country and to assess if they had been trafficked. The majority were placed in foster care and all children were entitled to the full range of services available to looked after children in the borough. It was commented that Islington had recently received a steady arrival of Albanian children, the reasons for which were not clear as the borough did not have a historic Albanian community. As a result Albanian boys aged 14 to 17 comprised around 10% of the in-care population. Officers had noted that some of these children had given identical accounts of how they had travelled to the country and why they were seeking asylum and there was a concern that they were being brought to the country for illegitimate purposes. It was known that asylum seekers were being exploited to commit crime in other areas; for example young women had been trafficked to work in the sex industry in Manchester, and there were instances elsewhere of young men being brought to the country and coerced into organised crime. It was not known why the Albanian asylum seekers were arriving in Islington as opposed to other London boroughs; however it was possible that Islington was considered to be a better option than other boroughs; or the proximity to the Eurostar terminal at St Pancras could also be a factor. It was noted that the council had supported lobbying of the Attorney General to release detailed national data on crime committed by asylum seekers as this could help to identify the workings of international criminal networks, however to date this request had been refused. The Executive Member expressed concern that asylum seeking children were able to present themselves to the council without prior detection by the UK Border Agency.
- Councillor Picknell queried what evidence suggested that the Pause programme would become self-funding. In response, it was advised that the Pause programme estimated that if 100 women were spread over five sites over a five year period with no intervention, they could potentially have 264 children removed into care at a cost of almost £20million. In contrast, the cost of running the programme was £9million, making the potential saving greater than the cost of the programme.
- Councillor Picknell asked a supplementary question on the long-term effectiveness of the Pause programme. Councillor Caluori advised that there had been no pregnancies in the 18 month pilot period in Hackney, no

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pregnancies in the Islington trial to date, and that a national evaluation of the programme would be carried out in 2016.

- Following a question from Councillor Ismail, Councillor Caluori confirmed that the Pause programme offered reversible contraception and did not affect a woman's potential to have a family at a later date.
- The Chair requested further information on the future of the Lough Road Centre for children and young people with severe and complex disabilities. Councillor Caluori advised that, following an extensive consultation, parents were not found to be supportive of the proposals as there was a degree of uncertainty over how different facilities may operate. It was advised that it was possible to co-design services due to the relatively small numbers of service users and the council would be seeking to work with parents before a final decision was made.
- The Chair queried the composition of the Personnel Sub-Committee due to consider applications to the Corporate Director of Children's Services role, and in particular why no women were members of the Sub-Committee. The Executive Member advised that he was also frustrated by the composition of the Sub-Committee, however no way could be found to incorporate women within the agreed governance arrangements. The Executive Member agreed that an all-male appointment panel was not best practice, and commented that the appointment process also involved interviews with head teachers, young people, and an informal evening event to which members of the committee were invited. The Committee resolved that their disappointment with the composition of the Sub-Committee be formally recorded.
- A member of the public queried the performance of schools in achieving the council's target of 40% energy reduction by 2020. Councillor Caluori advised that he did not have figures to hand however a response could be provided outside of the meeting.
- A member of the public noted that the revised equality objectives agreed by the Executive in July 2015 did not include the continued monitoring of the GCSE results of BME pupils, and requested details of the latest GCSE results of BME pupils. Councillor Caluori advised that he did not have figures to hand however a response could be provided outside of the meeting.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the procedure for Executive Member questions be agreed; and
- 2) That the Committee's disappointment with the all-male composition of the Personnel Sub-Committee be noted.

87

REVIEW OF WORK PROGRAMME (ITEM NO. B4)

A discussion was had on the focus of the Alternative Provision review, in particular if sufficient emphasis was to be given to pupil referral units and the outcomes of students excluded from mainstream school. The Committee considered the witness evidence plan and agreed that the proposal to receive evidence from two head teachers and a representative of New River College would provide sufficient opportunity for the committee to consider matters relating to exclusions.

The Committee requested further data on the performance of alternative provision providers and the outcomes of pupils.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.30 pm

Chair