

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Scrutiny Review: Alternative Provision

Visit to Council Offices: 18 January 2016

On 18 January 2016, members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee visited the council offices at 222 Upper Street to meet officers working in the Alternative Provision service.

Members discussed the work of the service with Gabby Grodentz, Head of Alternative Provision, and Sally Dahl, Coordinator of Alternative Provision.

The visit was attended by Councillors Kaya Comer-Schwartz, Nick Wayne and Michelline Safe Ngongo; James Stephenson, the Secondary Parent Governor Representative; and a representatives from Children's Services and Democratic Services.

During the visit the following main points were made:

- The Alternative Provision service was a small team comprised of two members of staff. It was explained that Sally Dahl dealt with the operational side of the service, however contributed to the more strategic elements, which were primarily handled by Gabby Grodentz. Sally advised that her typical day may involve attending a child protection meeting, a meeting at a college, and a meeting with IFIT. Sally also regularly provided schools with updates on the progress of their pupils.
- Due to the small size of the team, work in the Alternative Provision service was described as "bitty", with officers having to carry out a wide range of tasks. Officers worked with pupils, parents, schools and other services such as youth offending and early intervention services on a daily basis.
- Both Sally and Gabby contributed to the quality assessment of providers.
- As a small service, officers had to be versatile and willing to develop new skills. One particular challenge for the service had been working with SEN pupils. Neither Gabby nor Sally had specialist SEN experience and there was no dedicated SEN coordinator for alternative provision pupils as there would be in a mainstream school. It was noted that there were six SEN students in the current alternative provision cohort. Some schools involved their SEN coordinator with alternative provision pupils, however this varied from school to school.
- Members noted that a number of pupils in alternative provision had multiple needs and vulnerabilities and several agencies were working with their families. It was explained that the service relied on other agencies and services to provide relevant information on pupils to support their work, however this was not always forthcoming. Whilst the service had a good relationship with early help services, it was commented that engagement with other services varied. The service had a positive working relationship with all schools in the borough.
- A member advised of a previous negative experience of an alternative provision provider, noting that the provider had low aspirations for pupils, did not challenge negative behaviour and did not engage with parents. Officers indicated that they would look into this further; however it was thought that the member was referring to

a provider which the council had since stopped using following similar concerns being shared by schools and the council.

- Officers confirmed that the service engaged with parents and pupils throughout the referral process. The service recommended that pupils visited two to four providers with their parents before completing a referral, as they would with a new school. It was suggested that pupils that did this tended to integrate better.
- A discussion was had on the quality of providers. The service emphasised to providers that academic standards were crucial and had previously set targets for providers, stating that the council would cease to place pupils with a provider unless improvements were made.
- It was explained that each provider was visited at least once a term or half-term, three to six times a year in total. The maximum interval between quality assurance visits was two years. Providers rated as good or outstanding were assessed once every two years, whereas others were assessed more frequently.
- A member queried the child experience of the alternative provision referral process and how the service worked with pupils who did not engage. In particular, it was queried how the service worked with pupils that had been referred to alternative provision and had visited providers, but had not found a provider that appealed to them. In response, it was advised that the service sought to be creative in such instances and could seek a bespoke provider. An example was given of a pupil wanting to study animal care, with a specific interest in reptiles. As this was not available through existing providers, alternative provision was sourced through Capel Manor College in Enfield.
- It was advised that if a pupil refused to engage with alternative provision altogether then this would be a matter for their school, as the school retained responsibility for the pupil's education. It was commented that such instances were very rare; officers could only recall three instances in recent years. Schools would alert the council's access and engagement team about pupils refusing to engage. Officers commented that it would be likely for other services to be involved with the family also, as those who refused to engage often had complex problems. Persistent non-engagement could lead to a pupil being excluded.
- A discussion was had on attendance. Officers advised that this was a known issue, with 50% of alternative provision pupils attending less than 80% of the time. However, there were sometimes complex factors which led to non-attendance. It was suggested that some pupils had significantly improved their attendance and this should be appreciated. An example was given of one pupil whose attendance increased from 20% to over 80% once the pupil moved to a more suitable provider and problems at home were resolved.
- Officers advised that one challenge of working with parents was reassuring them that their child's progress would continue to be monitored by the council and the school. Some parents were subject to professional intervention and needed additional support and reminders to attend key meetings. Officers commented that the service would like to have stronger relationships with parents; however this was not feasible within existing resources. Officers explained that parental engagement with the provider was more important than engagement with the council and suggested that parental engagement with providers could be improved by holding more celebratory events, to provide more positive reasons for engagement.

- Officers commented that not all providers employed qualified teachers and sometimes providers struggled to set expectations for pupils and manage behaviour. The service did not agree with the practices of some providers; it was explained that many providers required pupils to sit initial tests on entry to gauge their competencies in English and Maths and the testing methods of some providers were not as robust as others. The service was working with providers to improve their assessment of pupils.
- Some providers had previously commented that they did not receive sufficient information on pupils when they were referred to alternative provision. This had been rectified and pupil information was now provided from teachers, the head of year, and head teacher. Providers were supplied with pupils' key stage 2 and 3 levels which would help them to gauge the abilities of pupils, however it was not always possible to use this data, as if a pupil had a history of poor attendance then their attainment level was likely to have decreased.
- It was suggested that some providers could have a disproportionate focus on behaviour as opposed to teaching and learning. It was thought that some pupils could benefit from a greater academic challenge.
- It was noted that providers rated as inadequate were given one term to make progress; otherwise the council would cease to place pupils with the provider.
- Members noted that the council delivered training to providers in addition to the payment the provider received for admitting pupils.
- A discussion was had on how to reduce the number of pupils in alternative provision and if the council should challenge schools more on referrals. Officers commented that the council had to be careful in challenging schools, as schools were ultimately responsible for the child's education and if the council refused to accept a referral then a school could choose to make their own arrangements with a provider or exclude the pupil, both of which were likely to lead to poor outcomes for the pupil.
- Officers commented that the quality of referral paperwork received from schools varied, with some providing more detailed referrals than others.
- It was suggested that some referrals could be deterred if the council adopted a more rigorous referral process, with a formal panel decision and appeals process, similar to how exclusions are processed. Requiring schools to present a robust case supported by evidence could assist in reducing the number of referrals.
- Members queried if officers considered local schools to be sufficiently engaged in the education of pupils on alternative provision. It was advised that all schools were keen to receive information and had access to the quality assurance and registration systems; however some schools made greater use of these systems than others. It was commented that some schools did not attend child protection meetings for children on alternative provision, however it was appreciated that schools had resource issues and such meetings could potentially disrupt a whole day of teaching.
- The service had sought to increase engagement with social care and requested that social workers worked with the service as they would with a school, however this did not happen on all occasions. It was commented that social care had a particularly high turnover of staff which made developing good working relationships more difficult. Officers had previously attended social care team meetings to raise awareness of the alternative provision service. The alternative provision service was provided with the details of social workers allocated to pupils.

- Members queried how officers would improve the service if greater resources were available. In response, it was advised that greater training would be offered to providers to raise standards and the service would request regular access to a CAMHS worker. Officers suggested that some pupils would benefit from counselling, particularly on bereavement issues. There were instances of pupils being absent for a month or two following the death of a parent or grandparent, especially if their grandparent was their main carer. It was commented that providers and the alternative provision service were not skilled in this area and access to a dedicated worker for one day a week would be beneficial.
- Members requested that a further scrutiny visit to providers be arranged. Members expressed an interest in interviewing staff, pupils and parents.

Those present thanked the officers for their cooperation and contribution to the scrutiny review.