



## Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - 2 February 2016

reported that this visit was productive and also of relevance to the alternative provision scrutiny.

The Chair thanked officers for arranging the scrutiny visit to meet the Alternative Provision service at 222 Upper Street. It was reported that the visit was useful and the evidence gathered would assist the committee in forming robust recommendations.

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

None.

### 106 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. A7)

A member of the public asked if a comment could be provided on the exam results of schools in the borough, in particular the results of Highbury Grove school, where 40% of pupils achieved five GCSEs at A\* - C including English and Maths in 2015. It was noted that schools achieving below 40% were considered to be failing. In response, it was advised that the council was aware of the performance of local schools and would not be commenting further at present.

### 107 ALTERNATIVE PROVISION: WITNESS EVIDENCE (ITEM NO. B1)

#### (a) Evidence from Schools and New River College

The Committee received evidence from Tom Mannion, Head Teacher, and Maria McCarthy, Assistant Head Teacher with responsibility for Alternative Provision, St Aloysius' College.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- St Aloysius was satisfied with the council's alternative provision service. The college valued the information and updates provided on pupil progress and provider quality. The way in which pupil attendance was able to be monitored online was considered useful.
- The college was grateful that alternative provision was an option for pupils who may otherwise drop out of the education system. It was noted that St Aloysius pupils had made good progress in alternative provision.
- One possible service improvement identified by the college was speed of processing. An example was given of a referral to alternative provision which fell through after a delay in processing. It was reported that the referral was made at parental request and contact had been made with the provider, however the referral had taken six weeks to process.
- The college thought that alternative provision represented good value for money. The referrals made had led to positive outcomes for pupils and the providers offered clear pathways. The college did not consider that the negative connotations associated with alternative provision were justified.
- The college could not identify a particular profile of its students referred to alternative provision. It was commented that the ethnicity of those referred varied and there was no correlation to pupils qualifying for free school meals. In general, the more academically able students were not referred to alternative provision; however this was not always the case. The college referred pupils to alternative provision who were likely to benefit from the different style of education available.
- Following a query, it was advised that the college did not refer many SEN pupils to alternative provision.
- The college considered that some providers placed an excessive emphasis on pupil behaviour and did not offer a robust enough curriculum.

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- The college did not recognise the need to decrease the number of pupils being referred to alternative provision. It was commented that not all pupils were academic and the pupils referred to alternative provision were on a pathway which was better suited to their strengths. The college did not consider alternative provision to be for vulnerable pupils, but instead for pupils who wished to pursue a more vocational education. The college had referred many pupils to the Building Crafts College in Stratford and commented that this provider had excellent facilities and was able to provide practical apprenticeship-style qualifications not available in mainstream education.
- The college commented on how pupils could be supported to achieve better outcomes. Whilst some pupils were achieving a grade C GCSE in maths, the college thought that higher aspirations and a greater level of challenge would benefit some pupils. It was commented that too many pupils were studying Level 1 qualifications, equivalent to grade D – G at GCSE. The importance of a C grade or above in English and maths was noted.
- It was suggested that some providers did not sufficiently consider the individual academic needs of pupils. Whilst schools would set personalised targets for pupils, it was thought that some alternative provision providers were working towards all pupils achieving Level 1 qualifications and maintaining attendance.
- Before referring pupils to alternative provision the school would monitor pupil progress and involve parents in discussions about the pupil's pathway. The school followed the information passport procedure and would make referral to CAMHS, counselling, inclusion or anger management services as appropriate. The school had also appointed pupil mentors, pairing Year 11 pupils with Year 9s, to encourage pupils to stay in mainstream education. It was noted that the most challenging pupils often stayed within mainstream education.
- It was noted that an increasing number of pupils had asked to be referred as they wanted to study vocational qualifications. It was commented that these pupils recognised that they were not academic and had often heard positive experiences of alternative provision from friends. Although a pupil request did not always lead to a referral, the school would discuss the proposed referral with teachers and parents.
- The college queried if alternative provision should be considered as part of a school 'options' system. It was recognised that there were insufficient places to offer alternative provision as an option for all pupils, however the school considered alternative provision to be a valid pathway. Alternative provision was thought to decrease the number of pupils becoming NEET and offer a style of education which benefitted some pupils. It was suggested that providing vocational education opportunities for pupils who benefitted from this style of learning should be considered as a positive step.
- It was queried if there was a disparity between pupils' predicted grades in Year 7 and the level of qualification they achieved alternative provision. In response, it was advised that many of the pupils studying Level 1 qualifications in alternative provision had been predicted GCSE qualifications at the same level, however the college did not consider Level 1 qualifications to be sufficiently aspirational or challenging and thought that studying for Level 2 qualifications would be more appropriate.
- Although officers agreed that Level 2 qualifications were more aspirational and could offer greater challenge to some pupils, it was noted that the majority of vocational courses required a Level 1 qualification as a prerequisite for studying Level 2 qualifications. There were other barriers to pupils studying certain Level 2 qualifications; for example, pupils studying hairdressing at Level 2 had to be aged over 16 to be allowed to use scissors.
- It was commented that due to the lower teacher/pupil ratio, alternative provision was more expensive than mainstream education and therefore could

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not be rolled out as an 'option' to all pupils without reducing the quality of provision, however the Committee recognised the demand for vocational qualifications outside of alternative provision.

- Whilst schools and colleges recognised the need for value for money, it was noted that their primary concern was providing education that was suitable to pupil needs and offered appropriate pathways and opportunities for progression.
- The college commented that due to the demand for vocational qualifications the school had introduced a pathway for pupils post-16 which included BTEC qualifications at Levels 2 and 3 alongside GCSE English and Maths re-sits as required. It was noted that around 20 pupils were on the pathway and the majority were studying subjects such as sports science and business. Following a question, it was advised that this pathway particularly benefitted lower ability pupils who may otherwise leave the education system.
- The college commented that many schools re-developed under the Building Schools for the Future scheme did not prioritise technical facilities, such as those for woodwork, and there was now a demand for such subjects which could possibly be met through alternative provision, subject to providers being able to admit sufficient numbers of pupils.
- The Committee queried how many of the St Aloysius' pupils admitted to alternative provision would have otherwise been excluded if alternative provision had not been an option. In response it was advised that an exact number could not be given, however an increasing number were voluntarily moving to alternative provision. It was noted that all pupils were disengaged from mainstream education.
- Following a question, the college indicated that an education system which provided links to industry and learning in both schools and vocational settings could lessen the number of referrals to alternative provision. It was noted that some pupils considered the linear qualifications available in mainstream education to place an excessive emphasis on exams and this could be a barrier to engagement.
- The Committee queried the support provided to new teachers when dealing with difficult pupils. The college indicated that it was essential for new teachers to be nurtured, especially given the national shortage of new teachers. The college sought to support new teachers in issuing detentions, managing behaviour and making referrals to other agencies as appropriate. However, it was noted that teachers must be seen to be strong and independent in front of pupils.
- It was noted that, as education budgets were decreasing, opportunities for learning outside of the classroom were increasingly limited.
- Following a question from a member of the public, the college suggested that there was a further need for University Technical Colleges, which provided specialist technical and scientific education.

The Committee thanked Tom Mannion and Maria McCarthy for their attendance. Members were welcome to visit the school to find out more about its work.

The Committee received evidence from Julie Chambers, Deputy Head of Pastoral, Highbury Fields School.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Highbury Fields made very few referrals to alternative provision. Only three pupils had been referred in the past year.

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- The school was satisfied with the council's service. It was considered that there was a good selection of providers and pathways and a good level of contact with officers.
- The school considered that alternative provision represented value for money, however noted that it made few referrals.
- It was noted that the majority of Highbury Fields' pupils referred to alternative provision were White British, struggled with attendance and attainment and lacked focus in school.
- The school had implemented a project titled 'Achievement for All' which worked with White British pupils and parents on attendance, attitudes, engagement and aspirations. Families on the project were assigned a mentor in the school and had 1-on-1 meetings three times a year. The programme was focused on pupils in Years 8 and 9, before pupils started their GCSEs.
- Highbury Fields aimed to keep all pupils in mainstream education and only used alternative provision as a last resort. Although the demand for vocational education was recognised, the school emphasised to pupils that vocational pathways could be explored post-16 after GCSEs had been attained.
- The school recognised the importance of early intervention and had strict internal procedures which had to be met before a referral was made. The school emphasised the importance of pastoral care and advised that the senior leadership team met daily to discuss pupil concerns.
- The school sought to know pupils well and would work to identify what support was needed to keep the pupil in mainstream education and improve their outcomes. For example, the school considered English and Maths GCSEs to be essential and had revised pupil timetables to allow an additional focus on these subjects, as required.
- The school indicated that it had a strong governing body which had decided to invest in additional CAMHS support for vulnerable pupils.
- It was advised that some parents had asked about referring their child to alternative provision however the school considered that mainstream education was the best setting for all pupils. The school had an ethos that everyone could succeed in mainstream education with the right level of support.
- The school helped pupils to choose appropriate pathways at GCSE level. It was commented that not all pupils studied the English Baccalaureate as it was not in their best interests. The school explained that it acted in the best interests of pupils and was not concerned if this was detrimental to its league table ranking.
- Although it was noted that the school had limited experience of alternative provision, the school considered the alternative provision providers used to be excellent, especially in terms of integrating pupils and managing attendance. It was thought that relationships between schools and providers could improve, however the school did not consider this to be a matter for the council.
- The school thought that providers could give an additional emphasis to core subjects such as English and Maths.
- Highbury Fields would make a number of interventions before pupils were referred to alternative provision. The school sought to identify pupils at risk of referral early and would discuss their progress with Year Managers. The school would work with pupils to ensure they chose appropriate pathways and would tailor the curriculum to the pupil as appropriate, making use of different learning styles such as small group work. The school would make a referral to external agencies such as Families First or IFIT as required.
- It was noted that the school had very low exclusion rates and previously made use of an inclusion room for pupils at risk of exclusion, however this was no longer required.

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- The Committee noted the different approach of Highbury Fields School to St Aloysius College. Following a question on how the school handled pupil requests for referral, it was advised that pupils were encouraged to stay in mainstream education and gain qualifications before they committed to a vocational pathway. It was explained to pupils that this presented them with greater employment prospects. For example, studying hairdressing after attaining English and Maths GCSE could assist the pupil in managing their own salon.
- It was advised that the Achievement for All project had only been running for one year and was therefore difficult to evaluate, however the school was committed to working with parents and pupils and anecdotally it was thought that both pupil and parental behaviour had improved as a result of the project.
- The Committee queried if it was possible to develop a school-based alternative to alternative provision. In response, it was commented that use of small group work, focusing resources on vulnerable pupils and working to raise expectations could work to reduce the number of referrals to alternative provision.
- The Committee queried how schools worked to improve attendance. In response, the school commented that this was increasingly difficult due to reductions in the Access and Engagement Service. The school sought for all pupils to achieve 96% attendance and if attendance was a concern then this would be raised at every available opportunity with parents. The school emphasised to parents that children should not attend dentist appointments and similar activities inside of school hours.
- A member of the public noted the government policy for 'coasting' schools – those with less than 60% of pupils achieving 5 good GCSEs – to improve or be converted into academies, and queried the level of governor challenge at Highbury Fields School. In response, it was advised that the governing body robustly challenged academic performance and there were no current plans to convert the school to an academy.

The Committee thanked Julie Chambers for her attendance.

The Committee received evidence from Nigel Smith, Executive Head Teacher, New River College PRU.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- It was noted that the PRU was both a provider and commissioner of alternative provision.
- New River College was funded for 108 pupils however had 120 pupils on its register. Pupils arrived from a variety of settings, including permanent exclusions from Islington schools, Islington-based pupils permanently excluded from schools in neighbouring boroughs, referrals made under the Fair Access Protocol, SEN referrals, or referrals from the Securing Education Board where two or more alternative provision placements had failed for pupils.
- All pupils on alternative provision were also registered with New River College. It was commented that PRUs were not required to publish their exam results and therefore the results of alternative provision pupils were not associated with their referring school.
- New River College used alternative provision differently to mainstream schools. Eight pupils were on alternative provision and this was intended to provide pupils with a bespoke curriculum. This was considered to be an important tool for pupils with specific learning and behavioural needs. For example, some pupils spent two days a week with the Sparkplug Organisation

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which provided training on motorcycle maintenance. It was commented that the behaviour and attendance of pupils on alternative provision tended to improve.

- It was noted that the PRU had admitted several pupils who it considered to have special educational needs, even though the pupils were not registered as SEN when they were referred to the PRU. New River College was seeking to implement Education Health and Care Plans for around 30 pupils.
- It was noted that many New River College pupils were from disadvantaged backgrounds and were known to Children's Services.
- New River College had its own alternative provision coordinator and retained responsibility for attending team around the child meetings. The PRU was keen for its pupils to access services such as CAMHS and speech and language therapy as required.
- New River College focused on the needs of individual pupils and sought to give them the skills to make good progress in all aspects of their education.
- New River College acted as the alternative provision service for City of London Academy Islington, which did not make use of the council's own service. It was noted that the academy retained responsibility for pastoral care and attendance.
- The PRU considered the quality of alternative provision providers to differ. The Boxing Academy was identified as a particularly good provider in terms of its size and curriculum. The PRU had supported the quality assurance work carried out by the council's alternative provision service and found this process to be thorough. It was suggested that some providers could improve by offering a wider and more challenging curriculum.
- The PRU considered alternative provision to be good value given the positive impact it can have on the most challenging pupils.
- Although the PRU recognised that the attendance of pupils in alternative provision was often poor, the appropriateness of assessing these pupils against the same standards expected of those in mainstream education was queried.
- It was noted that many alternative provision providers were based outside of the borough and it was thought that exposure to a wider environment could benefit some pupils.
- The Committee noted that the majority of pupils attending the PRU were white working class and were generally known to other services. It was advised that previously a large proportion of New River College pupils were known to the youth offending service; however this number had decreased in recent years. The number of female pupils had increased from 2 to over 30 over the past five years; it was commented that some of the most challenging pupils were female.
- New River College recognised the importance of early intervention and considered that there should be more targeted intervention for families at an earlier stage. It was suggested that secondary school age was too late to address pupils' entrenched issues and schools could make greater use of the online Common Assessment Framework (eCAF) to better support pupils.
- New River College was operating its own 'Achievement for All' project and this had significantly increased parental engagement. A parents' evening was held every half term and typically had 85% to 95% attendance.
- It was advised that young people involved in a recent stabbing incident were known to New River College. The Committee noted that the perpetrators were known to be NEET and had considerable vulnerabilities. The importance of providing comprehensive support to young people and families was emphasised.
- The Committee queried the details of pupils on Education Health and Care Plans. It was advised that the majority had been issued plans due to learning

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difficulties. Some pupils were considered to lack empathy and the PRU was concerned that such issues had not been identified at an earlier stage, however it was noted that developmental delay would not necessarily be recognised on the old-style Statements of Special Educational Needs.

- The Committee queried if New River College thought some schools were too quick to exclude pupils. In response, it was advised that some schools, particularly those in neighbouring boroughs, could be considered to make exclusions too readily, however the PRU understood the need to make exclusions when pupils had displayed violent or criminal behaviour. It was suggested that the schools which excluded the highest number of pupils tended to have a similar approach to behaviour.
- The Committee noted the changes to funding which meant that PRUs were only funded for pupils residing in their own borough. It was noted that New River College still accepted pupils residing in neighbouring boroughs which had been excluded from Islington schools.
- A member of the public queried the support PRUs received from the Mayor of London and Greater London Authority. In response, it was advised that the council had assisted the New River College in applying for a grant from the Mayor which had funded half of an education welfare officer post, however this was due to expire in March 2016. It was also noted that there was a London-wide alternative provision and pupil referral unit network, however the usefulness of its meetings varied.
- New River College was pleased with the level of member and officer interest in its work and suggested that further work with Children's Services would be welcome.

The Committee thanked Nigel Smith for his attendance.

### (b) Briefing Notes 1 and 2

The Committee noted the briefing notes which provided referral and attendance data and further information on the role of schools and the 'Information Passport' process.

- Following a query, it was confirmed that the Securing Education Board considered where to place pupils who entered the borough's education system mid-phase, often after moving from another borough. It was commented that very few pupils were admitted to alternative provision through this route; however this had not always been the case. It was advised that the Board admitted a greater number of pupils to alternative provision between 2010-12; however this was no longer considered acceptable.
- It was explained that pupils residing in other boroughs could be referred to Islington's alternative provision service if they attended school in the borough. A member suggested that this was cost neutral as the funding the school received for the pupil was transferred to the provider.
- The Committee noted that the attendance of pupils in alternative provision tended to decrease throughout the year. Since 2014 the alternative provision service had its own education welfare officer and this had significantly assisted with challenging pupils and families on attendance. Officers commented that the families of alternative provision pupils would sometimes reassure each other about poor attendance and this was not helpful.
- Officers noted the concern that alternative provision was not value for money if pupils did not regularly attend, however suggested that individual pupil progress and engagement was as important as overall attendance.
- The Committee noted that some schools referred more pupils than others and queried what this suggested about the standards of local schools. In response, it was suggested that the alternative provision referral process could be more

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robust. It was thought that a decision-making board could offer a greater level of challenge to schools and recommend referrals to other services before pupils were admitted to alternative provision.

- The Committee noted the example information passport provided and queried if the pupil should have been referred to alternative provision given that she appeared to be a bright pupil with no particular behavioural issues. In response, it was advised that the pupil and parents requested a referral and not all alternative provision pupils had behavioural issues.
- The Committee noted the contrasting approaches of schools and the different reasons for referral to alternative provision. It was queried how many referrals were made solely for the purpose of entering pupils onto vocational qualifications. Officers commented that some schools referred to alternative provision more readily than others; however the council had to maintain positive working relationships with all schools and had no formal responsibility for holding schools to account.
- A member of the public noted that the number of referrals to alternative provision was decreasing while the population of the borough was increasing and suggested that the council should not impose arbitrary targets on reducing the number of pupils referred to alternative provision.

(c) Notes of Scrutiny Visit

Noted.

**108**

### **REVIEW OF WORK PROGRAMME (ITEM NO. B2)**

Noted.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.55 pm

Chair