

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Thursday, 22 September 2016

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Thursday, 22 September 2016 at 7.30 pm.

Present: Councillors: Debono (Chair), Ismail (Vice-Chair), Diner, Ward and Wayne

Co-opted member: Mary Clement, Roman Catholic Diocese

Also Present: Councillors Caluori

Councillor Theresa Debono in the Chair

154 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. A1)

Apologies for absence were received from Erol Baduna and Councillors Satnam Gill and Michelline Safi Ngongo.

155 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. A2)

None.

156 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. A3)

None.

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

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 28 June 2016 be agreed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

158 CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. A5)

None.

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

None.

160 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. A7)

None.

POST-16 EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING: WITNESS EVIDENCE
(ITEM NO. B1)

Holly Toft, Head of Play, Youth and Post-16, made a presentation to the Committee providing an introduction to the council's work in supporting the Post-16 education, employment and training of young people. The presentation summarised the council's legal obligations, services, recent performance and areas for improvement.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The council was required to ensure that all young people participated in learning until at least the age of 18. This included through college, sixth form, an apprenticeship, or a job or volunteering opportunity with a structured training programme. Requirements extended to age 25 for those with special educational needs or disabilities. Employment services for those wishing to access apprenticeships were also available for the mainstream cohort aged 18 – 24 through the iWork service.
- The council worked with schools to identify pupils at risk of dropping out post-16, or those who had already left. It was noted that these pupils often had vulnerabilities and barriers to engaging with education. Around 100 young people were classified as NEET; although this was a relatively small proportion of the total cohort, they required a significant amount of attention. Services were focused on the most vulnerable.
- The council worked to provide the 'September Guarantee' which required every Year 11 pupil at Islington schools, and every Year 12 resident in the borough, with a named educational offer. Officers commented that this was a significant annual task.
- Services were divided into those for young people aged 16-19 and those aged 19-24. The Progress Team worked with the most vulnerable young people aged 16-19, including those in the youth justice system or alternative provision. Intensive work was carried out with those who dropped out, including contact by email, text message, and social media.
- The Council provided a specialist vocational advisor. This post was introduced following feedback from schools that they were not as confident in offering advice on vocational pathways. Advisors provided independent support and guidance to enable young people to make their own decisions.
- Officers commented that those who engaged with services earlier, particularly those seeking employment, tended to have better outcomes.
- Although the service had detailed data for those aged 16 – 18, data was sparse for those aged over 18. It was possible to evaluate the number of people claiming Jobseekers Allowance, however this was not an accurate measure.
- Islington's NEET rate had significantly reduced in recent years, from an average of 8.3% in 2011/12, to 2.2% in 2015/16. However, young people ending participation at age 17 was still a challenge and further work was required to identify how best to support young people before they disengaged.
- Officers suggested that the council's own employment practices could be improved to better support young people. Although a number of apprenticeships were offered, it was thought that easing selection processes and offering 'traineeships' as a bridge to apprenticeships would benefit the most vulnerable young people.
- It was noted that some young people struggled with transitions to post-16 education and to the labour market. Officers advised that functional skills qualifications, which were previously available in a range of settings, were now primarily provided by colleges. Some young people classified as NEET found a college environment overwhelming and it was suggested that alternative

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pathways were required for young people in need of improving their literacy and numeracy.

- It was queried how many pupils who disengaged at age 17 re-engaged at a later date. Officers did not have figures available at the meeting however advised that this would be investigated.
- Colleges were obliged to let the council know when pupils disengaged from education. Following a referral, the pupil would be contacted by an advisor, either by phone or in person.
- A member queried if schools were doing enough to support pupils in preparing for further education and employment. Officers advised that schools had a responsibility to provide information, advice and guidance, however schools had different approaches and as a result the impact of their support varied. It was commented that there was no longer a statutory requirement to provide work experience, however some schools provided other services, such as mentoring.
- It was noted that young people classified as NEET often had multiple vulnerabilities, including health problems, behavioural problems, involvement of the criminal justice system, and being from a workless household.
- Officers advised that they would seek to provide a demographic breakdown of young people classified as NEET to a future meeting.
- It was queried how many young people NEET had mental health issues and how many had an Education, Health and Care Plan. Officers did not have figures available at the meeting however advised that this would be investigated. It was commented that mental health issues were recorded as a health issues, and few would have EHCPs.
- Following a query, officers advised they would report back on how many young people aged 19 – 24 had presented themselves for support.
- The Committee welcomed recent performance improvements, including that Islington performed better than the Central London, London and England averages. In response to a question, officers suggested that service improvements had been secured by improving the accuracy of data, which allowed officers to provide an effective and focused service.
- The Committee queried the approach of the council's services. It was commented that working with young people NEET was delicate and time-consuming work which required skill, trust, and tact. The council's support services were solution-based and focused on what young people could do, rather than focusing on barriers and what they could not do.
- It was confirmed that all apprenticeships were paid. The council's apprenticeships lasted for a minimum of a year.
- A member of the public queried how many young people NEET would have been eligible for the Education Maintenance Allowance. Officers advised that this would be investigated.
- The Committee noted the Witness Evidence Plan. Members with any comments or suggestions for witnesses were invited to contact Democratic Services.

The Committee thanked Holly Toft for her attendance.

162 **EARLY HELP SCRUTINY REVIEW: 12 MONTH REPORT BACK (ITEM NO. B2)**

Ruth Beecher, Head of Service – Early Help for Families, presented a report which provided an update on implementing the recommendations of the review of the Early Help service.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Whilst the council continued to prioritise early help approaches, it was highlighted that the Troubled Families funding received from central government was decreasing and the national funding formula for early years services was also due to change. Although the budget had been managed from year to year to mitigate the impact of reduced funding, financial pressure was building and these changes were expected to have an impact on service delivery. The Committee expressed concern at the financial challenges facing the service.
- Since the review, early help services had been realigned to improve engagement with schools. Families First now focused on primary aged children, and IFIT was for secondary aged pupils. It was thought that this focus had also assisted support workers.
- Positive working relationships with other departments had developed. Support workers were co-located with the anti-social behaviour team and the Youth Offending Service.
- Following consultation with service users, funding had been identified to establish an 'Early Help Ambassadors' programme, in which parents would be trained to help with engagement, building resilience, and providing feedback on services through mystery shopping exercises.
- The number of re-referrals to Families First was stable at around 18-19%. It was noted that families would often re-refer with different issues.
- The service had developed a very positive method of closing cases, which involved a letter being written to parents to help them reflect on their experience; explaining why early help was required, the support arrangements that had been put in place, the positive impact that had, and how they could continue to access support. An example letter was read out and noted.
- The Committee queried why a discretionary fund could not be offered to service users in financial crisis. Officers explained that those in extreme crisis could access funds from Children's Social Care under Section 17 of the Children Act. Officers suggested that a separate discretionary fund would have significant demand and sizeable administration costs.
- Officers commented that they had found the scrutiny review useful. It was suggested that the Committee reviewed services from a different perspective to Ofsted or a service audit and its input was valuable.
- A member of the public queried if any of the cultural opportunities offered to families had a focus on environmental sustainability. Officers indicated that this would be followed up outside of the meeting.

The Committee thanked Ruth Beecher for her attendance.

RESOLVED:

- (i) That progress in implementing the recommendations of the Early Help review be noted;
- (ii) That the risks to the future funding of early help services be noted.

UPDATE ON THE YOUTH OFFENDING SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN (ITEM NO. B3)

Liz Westund, Interim Head of Targeted Youth Support, presented the report to the Committee, which set out progress in implementing the Youth Offending Service Improvement Plan.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Interim Head of Targeted Youth Support had been in post for five months and reported that the service improvements needed had the support of senior management. It was reported that few posts were now held by agency workers and staff morale had improved. A process of standardising officer pay had been introduced.
- It was highlighted that the service still encountered problems with information management, as the introduction of a new assessment framework had identified gaps in the service's data. Work was underway to resolve this issue. It was not thought that this had an impact on the quality of the service received by young people; however the ability of the service to evaluate progress was affected.
- Following a query, it was explained that a new database had been introduced a few weeks before the previous inspection and the transfer of data had not been successful. It was suggested that staff needed a detailed understanding of the database to be able to use it effectively. This issue was being raised with other local authorities and the Youth Justice Board.
- The service had reviewed its ethos and was focused towards engaging young people in a motivational way. Evidence suggested that this led to positive outcomes. The service was also prioritising restorative justice practices, reducing gang affiliation, and improving the integration of services.
- Partnership work with the Police was a high priority and a service level agreement had been agreed.
- A new protocol for applying for Criminal Behaviour Orders had been introduced to ensure that they were used appropriately and led to realistic outcomes. This had increased the credibility of the service with the Magistrates Court.
- An internal audit of case work had recently found that 15 of 25 cases reviewed were rated as 'Good' or 'Excellent'. This was a considerable improvement on previous performance.
- The Committee identified that several of the actions on the improvement plan requiring Police support were RAG rated Red. It was queried if there were any barriers to working with the Police. In response, it was advised that relationships with the Police had improved substantially, however progress on co-location was not being made at the pace intended. It was acknowledged that this was partly due to technical issues; however the matter had been raised with the Deputy Commissioner and the Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime. The Committee suggested that the Borough Commander could be invited to a future meeting of the Committee.
- Following a query, it was advised that the proposal to review the Intensive Support and Surveillance service had been agreed and it was hoped that this would have a positive impact.
- It was advised that the effectiveness of exit plans was evaluated by tracking re-offending.

The Committee thanked Liz Westlund for her attendance.

RESOLVED:

- (i) That the updates to the Youth Offending Service Improvement Plan be noted;
- (ii) That the Youth Justice Services Management Board be asked to continue to oversee progress on the plan.

164 EXECUTIVE MEMBER QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. B4)

Councillor Joe Caluori, Executive Member for Children, Young People and Families, answered questions related to his portfolio.

- Councillor Ward queried if Councillor Caluori could explain the recent decline in GCSE performance of local schools. Councillor Caluori expressed his concern that the performance of Highbury Grove and Holloway schools had declined, and in particular that only 35% of Holloway School pupils achieved five A* to C grades, which was below Ofsted floor targets. It was reported that the Headteachers of both schools were working with their governing bodies and the council's school improvement team to make improvements and robust conversations were taking place. In particular, Highbury Grove school was undertaking further work with the council's early help services. Councillor Caluori appreciated that both schools had challenging cohorts, however did not think that this was significant enough to result in disparity in performance to other local schools.
- It was suggested that the Committee could review the effectiveness of schools' use of interventions in the next municipal year, however the difficulty in evaluating the long term effectiveness of interventions was noted.
- Mary Clement commented that variation in GCSE performance would be expected in a cohort with a significant number of SEN pupils.
- Councillor Rakhia Ismail advised that some BME pupils attended supplementary schools to support their education, and similar opportunities may not be available to White working class pupils. It was thought that such opportunities supported GCSE attainment.
- Councillor Ward noted that some high performing academies provided intensive summer schools and it was queried if local schools could collaborate to provide a similar service. Councillor Caluori advised that summer schools were available, particularly for pupils at the D/C borderline, however places were limited. It was suggested that the council could learn from successful providers of supplementary education, such as IntoUniversity, to help to develop services locally. Mary Clement commented on the importance of empowering parents to support their child's education.
- Ernestas Jegorovas asked if it was sensible to expand Highbury Grove School in light of its recent GCSE results. In response, Councillor Caluori advised that the school was popular in the community and its expansion was consistent with Ofsted rules.
- Councillor Caluori advised of his concern at the DfE proposal to open a secondary free school at the Ladbroke Grove site. It was noted that the free school provider was not required to share its plans with the council and, given its proximity to both Highbury Grove and Highbury Fields schools, the proposal could result in up to 3,000 pupils dispersing from the area every day from only five bus stops.

The Committee thanked Councillor Caluori for his attendance.

165 **REVIEW OF WORK PROGRAMME (ITEM NO. B5)**

The Committee noted that it had a sizeable work programme and requested that officers and scrutiny witnesses provide information in advance where possible to maximise the time available for questions at the meeting.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.35 pm

Chair