London Borough of Islington

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Monday, 15 January 2024

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Monday, 15 January 2024 at 7.00 pm.

Present:	**Councillors:**	Chapman (Chair), Bossman-Quarshie (Vice-Chair), Craig, Jegorovas-Armstrong, North, Ogunro, Pandor and Zammit
Also Present:	**Councillors**	Ngongo and Williamson
	Co-opted Member	Mary Clement, Roman Catholic Diocese

Councillor Sheila Chapman in the Chair

162 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. 1)

There were no apologies for absence.

163 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. 2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

164 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

165 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (ITEM NO. 4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 28th November 2023 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them

166 CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. 5)

The Chair reminded members of the upcoming evidence gathering sessions, as part of the Committee's review into The Children's Workforce. This included a focus group with teachers and support staff which had been delayed, a focus group with Human Resources, and a visit to the Islington Foster Carers Association's Coffee Morning. Members were also encouraged to contribute suggestions for evidence sessions.

The Chair paid tribute to the Director of Safeguarding, Laura Eden, who was leaving the Council after eighteen of years of service, to take up a post in the London Borough of Newham; particular commendations were paid for Laura Eden's role in overseeing a reduction in the population of looked after children, creating Bright Futures, embedding trauma informed practice and Islington's motivational practice

model in the organisation. Members of the committee also expressed their gratitude for her service, on behalf of the borough's children and young people.

167 EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (ITEM NO. 6)

None.

168 ITEMS FOR CALL IN (IF ANY) (ITEM NO. 7)

None.

169 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. 8)

None.

170 BRIGHT START AND FAMILIES FIRST FOR CHILDREN PATHFINDER PROGRAMME UPDATES (ITEM NO. B1)

Officers began their update by stating that they had bought this item to members for information and feedback. The purpose of the item overall was to show the volume and scope of the universal offer, the current environment and the shifts that were underway. This was a draft report and in future, it was envisaged that officers would report on this annually, to scrutiny. In the discussion, the following points were raised:

- This was the first opportunity to have an integrated Bright Start report, as well as the first time that health data had been incorporated. Officers had also captured the volume of registrations for Bright Start services, activity data and demographic data, which had enabled resources to be shifted as required.
- There were 697 maternal assessments given to mothers in Quarter Two.
- The Families First for Children Pathfinder (FFCP) Programme was the result of a children's social care review by the Department for Education (DfE). Part of the aim was to think about how social care and early help services could be run differently. The government had committed £2 million, for test and learning approaches. In the first wave last year, three or four pilots across the country were given the resource for this. The government had since tested interest for six bids as part of a second wave, for which Islington had submitted a bid.
- There were several parts to the reform, including reviewing safeguarding partnership arrangements; a major piece of work around social care; the joining together of services and consideration given to running family services differently.
- Even if Islington's bid was unsuccessful, there was now legal guidance to say that the Children in Need service did not need to be operated by qualified social workers, which could for example, include bringing in officers from Family Help. Officers stressed that Horizon Scanning was in place. It had also been ensured that Children in Need services were in the same ward locality format as bright start, bright futures and early help services, but concern had been raised in feedback from the Association of Directors of Childrens Services, regarding how a council would manage monitor risk.
- Islington had a combined front door, unlike other local authorities. There was minimal transfer and changes of contact, bringing stability to families.
- Members noted in the key findings, that there had been an increase in children attending SEND groups and enquired as to what that meant for children that

then moved into schools. In response, members were told that the SEND groups currently delivered were interventions, which would then be followed by support. The intervention and support wouldn't necessarily prevent SEND issues, but in the cases of developmental delay, the early support would likely prevent these issues becoming disorders, as the ability to change outcomes was greatest in early years.

- Members noted that the many families came to Islington for the Bright Start provision, but enquired as to how a family support worker would cope, logistically or financially, with being a lead professional for no extra pay. In response, members were told that it was absolutely right to question the capacity of system and that the family need encompasses all – there were risks in the approach of treating all cases as though they were social services-related. There was already the right number of staff to manage the Children in Need cases and Early Help services, but officers were waiting to hear what learning will come out of the programme's first wave.
- Members were told that safeguarding partners were already starting to think about the rollout of family hubs. Families wanted to receive a service in their community that was accessible, and family based. A meeting had taken place whereby, discussion was had on how safeguarding influences family help services. The Fairer Together strategy had helped with that vision.
- Members noted that the Quarter 4 registrations for those aged four, were at 106%, and enquired as to the reason behind the rise. In response, members were told that the Children's Social Care review was very focused on decision making and families making decision for themselves and encompassed all work of the family. It wasn't that 100% was being reached, but the data was sometimes elective and not always updated. Officers ensured there was a reduction in duplication of services by working with partners and utilising opportunities.
- Members asked how officers adapted the offer to different groups of the community, to which the Committee were told in response, that some of the programmes were targeted. Data was used to identify gaps and challenges. An example was commissioning of tuition to Turkish and Somali children, some of which was able to be done internally. It was important that those that come through the universal service were then fed through to the specific service that captured their needs.
- Members praised the Health Visitors' work as exceptional.
- Members voiced concern and questioned the possibility of how a volunteer, for example, would be quality assured / safeguarded, should the Government's proposed approach allowing the work of a qualified social worker to be done by non-professionals, come to fruition. In response, the Committee were told that the current setup was for the safeguarding partnership to train staff and partner agencies. Partners were already required to have a designated safeguarding lead and there was already a good referral system; additionally, all staff were able to identify child abuse and any child in need of early, targeted support would have this overseen by a qualified social care manager. However, there would be a need to build in further mechanisms to manage those safeguarding risks, should more families were being worked with by a non-social worker, it is possible though. It was at the Council's discretion to refuse the proposed changes currently, but there was always a possibility that in future, this could become a funding-dependent requirement.
- Members noted that Islington had good practice currently, and enquired as to how, with all the proposed new initiatives, that good practice would remain. In response, the Committee were told that the ultimate responsibility would

always sit in statute with the Director of Children's Services, but it was a matter of ensuring the basics remained in place, that quality assurance methods were in place and that there was continuous auditing and reviewing with families and staff.

RESOLVED:
That the item be noted.

171 SCHOOL ORGANISATION SCRUTINY UPDATE (ITEM NO. B2)

The Chair opened the item for discussion first by noting to officers, that the Committee were interested to hear about progress on the ground with specific schools. In the discussion on the item, the following points were raised:

- Officers highlighted that plans to reorganise, amalgamate and close schools were very difficult decisions and accepted that these would not be popular, but that the feedback from schools was broadly understanding of the rationale behind the proposals. In terms of the specific schools affected, officers stated that the proposals had understandably not landed particularly well, given the impact on those schools and their school community. Broadly, however, schools were said to have preferred that the council was taking decisions swiftly, given the urgency of the situation, with factors such as the cost of living, low birth rate, and the housing crisis, all contributing to falling pupil numbers, the impact of which was being felt by schools financially.
- Officers were mindful that the conversations they had with affected schools were sensitive and approached it as such, given the direct impact on those schools' staff and families.
- Members were told, that while Islington as the local authority can propose closures for its maintained schools, there were complexities regarding faith schools. While officers always aimed to work in partnership with the relevant diocese, there had been instances where this relationship had been more challenging when considering possible school mergers and closures.
- Additional complexities included schools obtaining academy sponsors/status. While officers had nurtured relationships with academy boards in the borough, they had no authority to direct academies to close or reform, which impacted on the council's ability to take a strategic approach to building resilience in local schools.
- Officers reiterated that these proposals were made with reluctance, and in response to falling pupils in inner London. A significant number of the borough's schools were one form entry. It was stressed that it was the absolute last resort to propose a school for closure, and there would have been both a strong evidence base in support of the measure, and an exhaustion of all other options before taking this step. Many factors would be taken into account, including capacity in neighbouring schools and the resilience across the entire school estate.
- In response to members' questions regarding the inclusion factor, officers stated that they were mindful that most schools in the borough had high numbers of students with SEND or in receipt of free school meals, and carefully considered the impact to them in their proposals. Officers went on to state that they had explored several variables that could help address the impact on inclusion, but no option was without challenges.
- The programme was currently in Phase Two and the timescale that officers were working towards, was to take forward the initial proposals. Every school had been RAG-rated, and a letter issued to each, confirming their individual

status. It often had to be explained that a red rating wasn't an immediate precursor to closure and meetings had taken place with schools that had been rated red, wherein officers would explain the data behind that classification as well as what would need to happen for a school to be proposed for closure.

- Officers confirmed that the list of each school's RAG status was being withheld from public disclosure due to it being a sensitive matter for the schools, their staff and the local communities concerned. There was also the risk of this data being misinterpreted, given that there had been confusion around red ratings. The letters that had been sent to schools with this information had been sent confidentially.
- The financial position of the borough's schools had the potential to impact the wider Council finances. The entire school estate had been mapped, in terms of financial position and viability as well as the offer. In the proposals, consideration had also been given about how the schools estate fit in with the wider corporate portfolio and potential alternate uses.
- Officers stated that they had to follow the Department for Education (DfE) consultation process, wherein decisions could be made only after the four-week formal consultation period had ended.
- Members made note that despite the procedures Islington had to follow, the local authority could still be emotionally intelligent in its conduct, which officers insisted that it was. In response they also stated that officers had shown resilience and maturity while carrying out this challenging work, and that to nurture positive working relationships in the community, it required all sides to approach the issue of school closures and amalgamations with maturity and understanding.
- Members made note that they did not want the proposals to exacerbate the issue of there being less families in Islington.
- Members highlighted that while there had been positive news in the local press about the implementation, a recent council report had acknowledged that there had been difficulties on transparency. In response, officers stated that they were investing a lot of time in engagement, which not just a matter of sending letters, but also having difficult and sensitive conversations with affected parties in the school and wider community.
- Officers stated that some of the conversations with the individual school governing bodies, was to encourage them to manage their resources more tightly. The scale of deficits in some schools were said to be bigger than the entire budget of that individual school. It was also acknowledged by officers that while the local authority could have taken more assertive decisions earlier in the process, the governing bodies of individual schools held responsibility for the direct management of their school's budget, with the local authority only having broad oversight. There had been a lack of a steer at a high level from the Department for Education (DfE) as to how early or fast to be taking decisions on the viability of schools, and it was a similar situation facing London's local authorities.

RESOLVED:
That the item be noted.

172 QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE REPORT (ITEM NO. B3)

The Chair opened the item for discussion. In the discussion, the following points were raised:

- Members expressed concern about school absence, particularly, persistent absence which seemed to be moving in the wrong direction and sought clarification on the issues impacting attendance in those schools. In response, officers stated that there were several concerning factors behind it, and historically, attendance had been poor in the borough, with improvement only seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Officers had been working on a cluster approach, which had included a session where 17 schools had been bought together to share best practice. Schools had also been RAG rated on their attendance.
- Members noted the absence of the white working-class boys demographic, from the data, and other anomalies regarding boys with pupil premiums and boys of Black Caribbean heritage. Officers advised in response that reporting was by exception, and that previous reports to committee had included detailed ethnicity breakdowns at members' request.
- Fines were not used in punitive ways for parents, but for recurrent offenders such as those that took holidays in term time.
- Research had shown the take up of two-year-old provision had dropped off by 10% since last year, but the expansion of the expanded childcare offer was said by members to be positive and would hopefully attract more providers to offer targeted two year old childcare. Officers clarified that the hourly rate was determined by central government to deliver the offer.

ACTION:
Officers to find time on the work programme for an update of the last three to four months of attendance.

ACTION:
Officers to provide data for white, working class boys, black Caribbean boys and boys with pupil premium funding.

ACTION:
Officers to invite members to the meeting with the Children's Commissioner.

173 WORK PROGRAMME 2023/24 (ITEM NO. B4)

The Executive Member's Report had been pushed to the next meeting of the Committee on 26th February 2024, where there would also be witness evidence from council officers and an update on achievement.

The reporting schedules for the Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership (ISCP) had changed and thus, the annual report would be presented to members in the autumn, which would fall in the next (2024-25) municipal year.

RESOLVED:
That the work programme be noted.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.05 pm

Chair