

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Thursday, 10 January 2019

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Thursday, 10 January 2019 at 7.00 pm.

Present: Councillors: Debono (Chair), Cutler (Vice-Chair), Bell-Bradford, Graham, Ismail, Ngongo, Spall and Woolf

Co-opted Member: Mary Clement, Roman Catholic Diocese

Also Present: Councillors: Champion and O'Halloran.

Councillor Theresa Debono in the Chair

55 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. A1)

None.

56 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. A2)

None.

57 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. A3)

None.

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

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 22 November 2018 be agreed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

59 CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. A5)

The Chair welcomed Councillor Graham, who had been appointed to the Committee at the December meeting of the Council.

The Chair noted that Councillor Caluori would be standing down as the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Families at the end of February 2019. The Chair thanked Councillor Caluori for his work and his commitment to Islington's young people.

The Chair advised that Councillor Caluori had written to all members advising of actions that would be implemented immediately in response to the Committee's review of Permanent and Fixed Period Exclusion from School.

Islington Council would provide more comprehensive information on independent sources of support available to parents and carers on its website and in the initial letter which is sent to parents and carers informing them of their child's permanent exclusion from school; the council would facilitate Islington Law Centre providing free parent workshops on the exclusions process; and Islington Law Centre had also agreed to hold monthly drop-in sessions, at no cost to the council, for parents and carers seeking independent advice on issues arising from their child's exclusion. The Committee welcomed these actions and was pleased that the scrutiny review was leading to positive service developments.

A member noted that the Committee had received evidence from three male head teachers at the previous meeting and commented that it would be helpful for the Committee to receive evidence from a more diverse range of witnesses in future.

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

None.

61 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. A7)

None.

62 PERMANENT AND FIXED PERIOD EXCLUSION FROM SCHOOL - EVIDENCE AND CONCLUSIONS (ITEM NO. B1)

a) New River College Ofsted Report

The Committee noted the report and was pleased that the pupil referral unit had been rated 'Good' by Ofsted.

b) Concluding Discussion

Candy Holder, Head of Pupil Services, introduced the paper and summarised the evidence received during the review. The Committee discussed the evidence received and shared their thoughts on possible conclusions of the review.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The most common reason for exclusion was persistent disruptive behaviour.
- Disadvantaged pupils, pupils with special educational needs, and BAME pupils were more likely to be excluded.
- The Committee noted the important role that governors play in the exclusion process and in shaping a school's ethos and behaviour policy. It was suggested that further work was needed to empower school governors to act on exclusion issues.

- It was queried if school behaviour policies were able to adequately address persistent disruptive behaviour. The Committee had not reviewed school behaviour policies as it was not responsible for scrutinising the activities of individual schools, however it was suggested that a peer review of behaviour policies and how they are implemented could be useful for some schools. The council could support the development of attendance and behaviour partnerships in which schools are able to share learning and best practice.
- It was suggested that increased transparency around the costs of exclusion, both financial and personal, could be useful to head teachers, governors, and parents.
- The Committee commented on the difficulty of targeting CAMHS and other interventions commissioned by the local authority when the service was delivered on a traded basis. Further work may be needed to engage with schools on the benefits of such services.
- It was commented that the significant variation in the exclusion rates of the borough's schools was a fairness and equalities issue; pupils living in one area of the borough were far more likely to be excluded than those in other areas.
- The London Borough of Hackney had adopted a good practice guide titled 'no need to exclude' which sought to focus schools on the alternatives to exclusion. It was suggested that adopting similar guidance with clear messages around reducing exclusion could be useful.
- It was commented that the pressure to achieve high levels of attainment, and the cost of keeping disruptive pupils in mainstream school, could be 'perverse incentives' to exclude in some instances. It was commented that this was a national issue which could not be solved at borough-level, however it might be appropriate to lobby central government on this issue. Officers commented that the Timpson Review had been asked to examine this particular issue.
- It was commented that zero tolerance behaviour policies tended to result in pupils being punished through exclusion. However, members commented that exclusion was not an effective form of punishment.
- Only 2% of head teachers nationally felt that they had sufficient resources for pupils with special educational needs.
- It was suggested that school league tables incentivised schools to compete rather than work in collaboration.
- It was commented that childhood was becoming increasingly difficult for disadvantaged young people; particularly those with multiple complex needs, and those who lived in poverty.
- It was queried if there was a correlation between a school's rate of exclusion and if the school used the New River College outreach service. In response, officers advised that there was no strong correlation; some high excluding schools used the outreach service. Members requested further information on this.
- It was queried if cuts to CAMHS had reduced young people's access to mental health support services. In response, it was advised that CAMHS was oversubscribed, however 25% of those referred to CAMHS

failed to attend their first meeting and a further 25% attended their first meeting and then disengaged from the service. Officers commented that this was because CAMHS was not the right service for their needs. The national CAMHS transformation programme was seeking to review the range mental health support available to young people outside of traditional CAMHS services; this would result in a broader offer of mental health support, which would better support young people and help to improve access to existing CAMHS services. However, a member commented that young people with multiple complex needs may find it challenging to engage with mental health services.

- It was commented that some young people needed to be supported in accessing mental health services; there was a stigma associated with accessing such services.
- A member suggested that the Committee's report should explain how exclusion from school impacted on children, parents and the local authority. It was suggested that information on the financial loss to the local authority should be presented to the Schools Forum and other teacher and governor forums as appropriate.
- A member commented on the impact that exclusion can have on the local community; excluded pupils may place additional pressures on voluntary sector organisations working to support the young person and their family.
- It was suggested that the Committee's report should highlight areas of good practice, encourage schools to collaborate and suggest practical alternatives to exclusion to governing bodies and head teachers.
- It was suggested that a 'good practice guide' should be produced for schools, governors and parents, setting out the local authority's expectations in regards to the exclusions process.
- Members commented that pupil referral units such as New River College are perceived negatively in the community. Whilst pupil referral units can be challenging environments, it was thought that further work was needed to highlight the achievements of New River College and minimise the stigma associated with pupil referral units.
- A member reflected on the Committee's focus group with parents and visit to New River College, commenting that young people and parents felt let down by the system, and requested an update on some of the issues that members had heard about. Officers provided updates in response to the request.
- It was suggested that school behaviour policies and practices needed to be transparent to both pupils and parents. Young people needed clarity in regards to how their behaviour would be monitored and how records of their behaviour may be used.
- The Committee requested a summary of the mechanisms the Council could use to influence schools; including incentives and methods of holding them to account.
- It was suggested that the council could develop an Islington Charter for Inclusion, a statement of intent that would set out the rights of young

people in relation to their inclusion in education. This could be developed with New River College pupils and the Youth Council.

- A member commented on the difficulties faced by pupils with autism and ADHD. It was suggested that schools could do more to support these young people, as behavioural issues could be a symptom of their needs.
- It was commented that the Committee's report should focus on preventing exclusion; the impact of exclusion; and supporting excluded pupils, including through challenging the stigma associated with exclusion. It was thought that teachers and school staff needed support in implementing new behaviour management practices.
- It was suggested that all school governors should receive training on their role in shaping a school's ethos and culture and on exclusion issues, including their role at an exclusion panel meeting. A member commented that he had been a governor at three schools and that such issues were not openly discussed by governing bodies.
- A member suggested that increasing the diversity of teachers and school governors would ensure that they better reflected the borough's young people.
- A member of the public asked how many fixed term exclusions had been overturned by school governors. In response, it was advised that school governors were unable to challenge fixed term exclusions of up to five days. Governors were able to challenge fixed term exclusions of over five days and were required to consider fixed term exclusions of 16 days or more, but officers did not have data on how many fixed term exclusions had been overturned by governors.
- The Committee noted the difficulty that residents may have in engaging with schools if English is not their first language.
- Following a question, it was advised that the council did recoup some costs of permanent exclusion from schools.
- The Committee noted the positive impact that adopting trauma informed practices had on some schools. Some schools had reported that the techniques had been very helpful in understanding the behaviour of their pupils. Following the pilot, one school had appointed a counsellor to work with children, families and staff; it was reported that this was very successful in improving the relationship between families and the school. It was suggested that the Committee may wish to promote the implementation of trauma informed practices as a method of preventing exclusion.

It was advised that the Committee would consider draft recommendations at its next meeting.

63 **THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ISLINGTON'S FREE SCHOOL MEALS POLICY (ITEM NO. B2)**

The report was introduced by Tania Townsend, Partnership Development and Strategy Manager; Deirdre Vimpany, Contract Manager; Marjon Willers,

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - 10 January 2019

Specialist Dietician; and Debbie Stevenson, Deputy Head of Finance for the Children, Employment and Skills directorate.

The following main points were made in the discussion:

- The Health and Care Scrutiny Committee had previously reviewed the council's Universal Free School Meals Policy and found it to be successful. The policy worked to provide Islington's children with nutritious meals and helped to reduce inequalities.
- The policy was a key part of the council's commitment to help residents with the cost of living. In Islington 14,000 young people were at risk of food poverty. Work carried out by the Fair Futures Commission identified that both low and medium income households struggled with the cost of living in Islington.
- Officers commented on the challenge of implementing the policy in 2009/10; it was explained that some school funding mechanisms operate on the basis of how many pupils are eligible for free school meals under the nationally funded scheme and schools and the local authority did not want to lose this eligibility data. The solution to this was to have every parent apply for free school meals. This allowed the council to assess every child's eligibility for the national scheme. This approach resulted in an increase in the number of young people identified as being eligible for free school meals, which reduced the cost of funding the council's universal scheme.
- Parents were asked to apply for free school meals in reception and again when their child reached Year 7. This was carried out through an online system.
- Schools understood the importance of maximising the government funding available for the scheme and worked hard to ensure that all parents applied for free school meals.
- The council's school meals catering contractor was Caterlink. Caterlink had been awarded the contract for 2018-23, with the option to extend for a further two years. The contract was based on enhanced food standards that surpassed the national minimum.
- Food was required to be fresh and Soil Association certified.
- School meals were varied throughout the week and reflected the diversity of young people's cultural backgrounds. There were options for a range of dietary needs.
- When the policy was implemented, work was required to refurbish some school kitchens. Islington Council assisted with procurement and financing the refurbishment in some instances.
- School meals were healthier than the average packed lunch. Officers commented on the importance of children's nutrition. In particular, iron intake was crucial to support cognitive function.
- School meals introduced young people to fruits and vegetables they may not eat at home. It was reported that beetroot was particularly popular in Islington schools.
- Four maintained primary schools were outside of the council's school meals contact. It was advised that these schools were required to meet

rigorous standards and officers worked closely with environmental health to ensure that these standards were met. In response to a question, it was advised that some schools were outside of the council's school meals contract for historical reasons and wanted to have more control of their school meals. Other schools had left the contract as they were dissatisfied by the service received from a previous contractor and had decided not to reintegrate.

- It was reported that 90% of pupils opted for a school meal and take up had increased over recent years. The Committee asked why all pupils did not subscribe to the scheme. In response, it was advised that some pupils with allergies and intolerances did not subscribe, even though the contractor was keen to work with parents on allergy and intolerance issues. It was also commented that some children had strict dietary preferences and were extremely selective in their diet.
- In response to a question, it was commented that officers also worked with Public Health to provide curriculum guidance on nutrition and culinary skills. By Year 6, all pupils were expected to be able to cook a simple savoury meal by themselves.
- Officers supported the 'Families for Life' after school cooking club in which parents and young people aged 2 to 11 could learn to cook meals together. This was held in schools and community centres, however, places were limited to a maximum of 18 per session. The sessions were delivered through the Bright Start family support service.
- Caterlink had invested in school gardens to support pupils growing their own fruit and vegetables.
- The Committee queried how the council defined and measured 'food poverty'. In response, it was advised that a needs assessment had been carried out and would be circulated to members.
- In response to a question, it was advised that the universal free school meals scheme was particularly beneficial to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with no recourse to public funds. In some instances, the scheme ensured that young people had at least one nutritious meal a day.
- A member commented that levels of persistent absence in primary schools may have impacted take up. Some young people would not eat a nutritious meal if they did not attend school; this gave an additional impetus to address persistent absence.
- In response to a question from a member of the public, it was advised that schools educated young people on the carbon footprint of their meals. School kitchens were accredited to the Green Kitchen Standard which recognised energy and water consumption and waste. School kitchens were also working to eliminate the use of cling film by the end of the year.
- Following a query about vegan meals, it was advised that one day a week a vegetarian meal was served to all pupils. Vegetarian meals were provided every day and there was a limit on the amount of dairy school kitchens could serve in a week.
- A member queried the relationship between school meals and obesity. In response, it was advised that whilst school meals were healthy and

nutritious, they only provided around 17% of a child's nutrition. Obesity was a significant issue among young people, although Islington's obesity rate was lower than neighbouring boroughs.

- It was advised that Caterlink was keen to pilot new meals with Islington children; the borough's young people were very willing to try a diverse range of meals. This was in contrast to some other areas the caterer served, where pupils were less accepting of new and different foods.

The Committee thanked officers for their attendance.

RESOLVED:

That Islington's Universal Free School Meals Policy, and its contribution to supporting children and families and mitigating food poverty, be noted.

64 QUARTERLY REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE (Q2 2018/19) (ITEM NO. B3)

The report was introduced by Carmel Littleton, Corporate Director of Children, Employment and Skills; and Laura Eden, Director of Youth and Communities.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The number of new entrants to the criminal justice system had decreased, however the rate of reoffending had increased. It was commented that there was a small but significant cohort of young people who were very entrenched in criminal behaviours.
- The number of custodial sentences for young people was higher than the previous year. Officers had reviewed all of the sentences given and agreed that they were appropriate given the seriousness of the offences, which were generally violent.
- In response to a question, it was advised that black males were over represented in the criminal justice system. It was advised that the Youth Justice Management Board would be carrying out a project on disproportionality and addressing discrimination of black males.
- It was queried if the young offenders had previously been excluded from school. In response, officers could not confirm if the young offenders currently in the system had been excluded or not, but pupils in mainstream school were less likely to offend than those in pupil referral units.
- Officers commented on the increase in the number of young people missing from care. The council was working closely with the Police and received a weekly update on all cases. It was advised that most young people who went missing from care kept in touch with a parent or professional.
- In response to a question, it was advised that the most common age for a young person to go missing from care was at 16 or 17 years old. The council was working with foster carers and other care providers on when it was appropriate and necessary to report a young person as

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - 10 January 2019

missing; it was reported that some young people had previously been reported as missing when they were simply late home.

- Officers commented that persistent absence from primary school was an issue in nine schools. It was a long-term issue in three of those. It was reported that some persistent absence was attributable to health issues and officers were working with health colleagues on such cases. In other instances, it was necessary to make a referral to early help services.
- It was reported that the primary schools with high levels of persistent absence generally did not issue fines to parents for non-attendance.
- A new attendance tracking tool had been developed and would be implemented by schools.
- The Committee received an update on the work to narrow the gap in attainment between Black Caribbean pupils and the remainder of the cohort. It was advised that efforts to close the gap had been stepped up, a plan with clear priorities had been developed, and meetings were being held every half term. Equalities would be the theme of the upcoming head teachers conference. Officers had arranged training sessions on cultural bias for head teachers, deputy heads and other school staff.

It was agreed that the remainder of the item be deferred to the next meeting.

65 **WORK PROGRAMME (ITEM NO. B4)**

Noted.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.15 pm

Chair