

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Tuesday, 17 September 2019

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 1, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD - Islington Town Hall on Tuesday, 17 September 2019 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Cutler (Chair), Woolf (Vice-Chair), Bell-Bradford, Graham, Jeapes and Williamson

Co-opted member: Mary Clement, Roman Catholic Diocese

Also Present: Cllr Comer-Schwartz, Executive Member for Children, Young People and Families.

Councillor Vivien Cutler in the Chair

112 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. A1)

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Ngongo and Cllr Clarke-Perry.

113 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. A2)

None.

114 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. A3)

Cllr Williamson declared a personal interest in Item B1, Equalities in Educational Outcomes – Witness Evidence, as a governor at St Marks Primary School.

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

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 9 July 2019 be approved as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

116 CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. A5)

The Chair referenced the committee's review of exclusion from school and that the Executive response to the recommendations was due in the autumn. It was noted that the Secretary of State had announced details of forthcoming education reforms which included a renewed focus on behaviour and supported the use of exclusion. The Committee expressed concern that these reforms would not support vulnerable young people at risk of exclusion from school.

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

None.

118 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. A7)**

None.

119 **EQUALITIES IN EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES - WITNESS EVIDENCE (ITEM NO. B1)**

a) Data Update

Harry Donnison, QPMU Service Manager, presented an update on the performance and progress of Black Caribbean pupils and White UK pupils eligible for free school meals, taking into account the 2019 provisional exam results.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The number of Black Caribbean pupils in each school year was under 100, therefore there could be a significant statistical fluctuation in attainment and progress from year to year.
- The number of Black Caribbean pupils achieving the Good Level of Development at Early Years Foundation Stage had increased in recent years and the gap between Black Caribbean pupils and the Islington average was closing; however, White British pupils eligible for free school meals still experienced an attainment gap in Early Years.
- In response to a question, it was suggested that separating data by gender would not provide results with statistical significance, as the number of Black Caribbean pupils in each school year was under 100. It was indicated that a breakdown by gender and Free School Meals eligibility could be provided by analysing a four year rolling average of results.
- In 2019 there had been a decrease in Attainment 8 scores for all demographic groups and it was commented that this may be a national trend.
- The 2019 Key Stage 4 exam results indicated that the attainment gap had persisted and appeared to be widening over time.
- Officers noted that some measures were subject to a considerable statistical variance and the data had to be interpreted in that context.
- The Committee indicated that they wished to talk to a range of groups about their experiences and what they thought were the factors that contributed to the attainment gap.

b) Panel of Headteachers

The Committee received evidence from a panel of local Headteachers, including Martha Braithwaite (St Marks CE Primary School), Juliet Benis (Ambler Primary School), Damian Parrott (Drayton Park & Montem Primary Schools), Sarah Beagley (Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Secondary School), Mita Pandya (Archway and Willow Children's Centres) and Jane Heffernan (St Aloysius Secondary School).

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Headteachers commented that comparing the academic attainment of different demographic groups had to be handled in a sensitive way. Schools focused on pupils as individuals, and targeted interventions to their particular needs, rather than seeing them as part of a wider demographic trend. For example, some schools had fewer than five Black Caribbean pupils across all age groups. It was therefore not always possible, or appropriate, to target school-level interventions at particular groups.
- It was emphasised that the attainment gap was a national issue and, while actions could be taken to reduce the gap locally, the issue may require a national solution.
- Headteachers suggested that passing on pupil and demographic data to parents could be useful in addressing the attainment gap. It was suggested that schools should raise the aspirations of all pupils and tackle underachievement in an honest and straightforward way.
- Some schools made use of mentors to work closely with underachieving groups, however such interventions could only be targeted at a small number of pupils. Such interventions were typically reserved for those most in need of support.
- Headteachers commented that regular engagement with parents from Early Years onwards was important to build a working relationship with parents. It was commented that it was more difficult to engage with parents as pupils got older, so it was important to develop relationships from an early age.
- It was important for schools and settings to build effective working relationships with families, however this could be challenging if parents did not have a positive experience of school.
- Some Early Years settings took a holistic approach to engaging parents and delivered family activities including gardening and healthy eating projects. Such activities were beneficial both to children and their families and provided an opportunity for settings to develop relationships with parents in a structured way.
- Some schools worked with parents on how they could support their children to succeed in school. For example, schools teaching parents how to support their child in learning to read.
- Headteachers spoke of the importance of young people having positive role models.

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- Drayton Park and Montem primary schools were acutely aware of the impact of disadvantage. It was commented that some pupils had low expectations of themselves and the schools were keen to challenge this while ensuring that their systems and processes did not compound disadvantage. For example, the schools had moved away from traditional setting by ability, as there was evidence to suggest that this compounds inequality by capping pupils' aspirations and expectations.
- Headteachers commented that many disadvantaged young people experienced social and emotional issues and they acknowledged the role of schools in supporting them. Several Headteachers commented that they had embraced Trauma Informed Practice as a method of supporting young people who had experienced trauma.
- It was observed that disadvantaged pupils sometimes have a more restricted vocabulary. This has an impact on how they understand the world and communicate with others.
- Headteachers advised that schools knew which pupils experienced disadvantage. These pupils were identified to teaching staff who were provided with details of their particular needs whilst maintaining confidentiality.
- Headteachers spoke of the importance of regularly inviting parents into school to meet with teaching staff to discuss the progress of their children. A member queried if families with working parents, particularly those in challenging financial circumstances and working multiple jobs, were missing out on such opportunities because they did not have the time to attend school meetings. In response, it was suggested that schools planned events and activities at different times of day to ensure parents were able to attend. Schools maintained records of which parents attended such events to assist with targeting future events.
- The Committee asked whether Headteachers believed that it was helpful to analyse pupil attainment and progress alongside demographic factors such as ethnicity. Although Headteachers recognised the demographic trends, they thought that the personal circumstances of pupils had a greater impact on the targeting of interventions than wider demographic factors. Resources for support services were scarce and schools were more likely to target specific interventions at those with known issues, rather than at demographic groups.
- Some schools made use of a Pupil Passport. This was a document which set out pupil needs, views and opinions and could be very useful when children transferred school or transitioned from Primary to Secondary education. Such tools were generally used for pupils with additional needs, however, in theory, could be used for all pupils. It could be helpful to provide these documents to parents so they understood their child's needs and how schools were working to meet them. It was commented that transition from Primary to Secondary school could be very difficult for pupils with additional needs and vulnerabilities.
- Some schools made use of the Education Endowment Foundation toolkit for parental engagement. This focused on providing parents with practical strategies for supporting learning at home, tailoring school

communications to encourage positive dialogue about learning, and offering sustained and intensive support where needed.

- Headteachers welcomed the council's '11 by 11' cultural entitlement programme, as it provided schools with a framework for cultural activities they could share with parents. Not all families participated in cultural activities outside of school and the programme could be used to encourage families to take up such opportunities in their own time.
- The Committee asked whether there were any barriers to improving the attainment of Black Caribbean and White British pupils eligible for free school meals. In response, it was suggested that there was no single solution. Some Headteachers spoke of the importance of aspiration, of providing careers advice at an early age, and of taking advantage of the cultural activities that London had to offer. They also commented that developing the confidence of pupils and parents was crucial. Other Headteachers spoke of the importance of parental mental health, noting that parents needed the capacity to be able to support their child to learn at home.
- Headteachers suggested that further engagement with Early Years services, as well as destigmatising accessing support services, particularly speech and language, would ensure that pupils were better supported in their learning.
- Some Headteachers were critical of the national curriculum, stating that English GCSE, in particular, now required a middle-class cultural knowledge that disadvantaged families and those from non-British backgrounds did not identify with.
- It was suggested that the significant increase in university tuition fees in 2012 had changed how young people from lower income families viewed their future.
- A Headteacher spoke of the importance of school attendance, emphasising that persistent absence had a significant impact on attainment.
- A member of the public asked whether the schools bought in additional support services for pupils, such as early help workers or therapists. In response, it was advised that schools did buy in additional support services and interventions, however resources for these additional activities were finite. It was hoped that Trauma Informed Practice would embed supportive practices within schools, which could have a significant impact at relatively low cost.
- The Committee enquired if there were any specific teaching strategies that could help these groups. One Headteacher commented that it could be beneficial to help lower attaining pupils in developing their long term memory. Teaching strategies to achieve this might include using basic images and repetition in class. Other Headteachers spoke of the importance of recognising the symptoms of trauma and not overloading pupils. It was also suggested that the learning environment was very important; pupils needed comforting and calming spaces to learn effectively.
- Some secondary schools provided after school study zones for their pupils, as it was recognised that some young people did not have

appropriate study space at home. Others also provided activities before school hours to develop pupils' organisational skills and to help them prepare for the day.

- It was noted that residential trips could have a significant positive impact on young people, particularly in building their confidence and expanding their knowledge. These visits did not have to be entirely recreational and could even focus on an area of academic priority, such as mathematics.
- The Committee sought further information on the factors and wider determinants that contributed to underperformance. In response, Headteachers advised that the mental health of pupils and their parents could be a factor; and the children of young parents might face more disadvantage that could impact on attainment. Insecure or unsuitable housing could also affect a young person's performance at school, as could food poverty. Headteachers emphasised how these pupils and their families could be supported by early help services and stated that they made referrals as appropriate.
- The Committee queried the demographic make-up of teachers in the borough and whether the backgrounds of teachers reflected the young people they teach. It was advised that teachers came from a range of backgrounds but these did not necessarily reflect the demography of the borough. Further, teachers were university educated and therefore had experiences and backgrounds that some young people found difficult to relate to. It was also noted that relatively few men worked in primary schools.
- Secondary schools could make use of alumni to provide role models and mentors for young people.
- In response to a question, Headteachers set out how they would engage parents prior to a permanent exclusion.
- The Committee thanked the Headteachers for providing their views on best practice and asked whether there was anything more that could be done to address educational equalities issues. Headteachers commented that there was no single solution, however. Further resources to support young people would be welcome, and also greater support for managed moves between schools could help to reduce the number of permanent exclusions.
- A Headteacher commented that some young people were vulnerable and had very chaotic lives. Schools wanted to support young people as best as they could, but did not have the specialist expertise to provide long-term therapeutic care. It was suggested that some young people needed support and services beyond what could be offered by schools alone.

The Committee thanked the Headteachers and officers for their attendance.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- External inspections had previously identified many areas of strength in Islington's child protection services.
- The motivational practice model developed in Islington with grant funding from the Department for Education was being implemented successfully. There had been reductions in the number of looked after children and children subject to a child protection plan since the model was implemented.
- Trauma Informed Practice was one element of the motivational model and was being embedded in services for children across the borough. Trauma Informed Practice was championed by the Islington Child Safeguarding Board and training was provided to local authority staff and partner organisations, including schools. Officers considered that this was having a significant impact on staff and the way in which local services are delivered.
- Following a query, it was stated that councillors could attend a Trauma Informed Practice training session, however, this would also be covered in a forthcoming member development session on safeguarding matters.
- A member noted that Ofsted was due to carry out an inspection over the coming year and this would be carried out in accordance with the new inspection framework. The Committee asked about the changes to the inspection framework and how the council was preparing for these. In response, it was advised that the Youth Offending Service and services for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities were due a full inspection soon and officers summarised the areas that inspectors would review. It was noted that local authorities generally had performed well under the new inspection framework and that governance matters, including member-level leadership, were an important aspect of the new framework. The Committee noted the role of scrutiny in holding the Executive and senior officers to account on such issues.
- A member of the public enquired if there was a legal limit to the distance from Islington that a looked after child could be placed outside the borough. In response, it was advised that there was no legal limit to the distance and sometimes it was necessary to place children outside London due to safety and welfare issues. In addition, when siblings were placed in care, there was rarely accommodation in Islington large enough to take all of them together and therefore they may have to be placed elsewhere.
- A member queried why there had been a delay in holding some child protection conferences. In response, it was advised that this could be for a number of reasons, including parental mental health issues. However, the reason for delay had not always been clearly recorded and this was being addressed.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

121 **WORK PROGRAMME (ITEM NO. B3)**

Noted.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.20 pm

Chair