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London Borough of Islington

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Tuesday, 9 March 2021

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday, 9 March 2021 at 7.00 pm.

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| Present: | Councillors: | Cutler (Chair), Bell-Bradford, Graham, Williamson and Woolf |
| Also Present: | Councillors: | Ngongo |
| | Co-opted Member | Mary Clement, Roman Catholic Diocese Zaleera Wallace, Parent Governor Representative (Secondary) Claire Ballak, Parent Governor Representative (Primary) |

Councillor Vivien Cutler in the Chair

229 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. A1)

Apologies were received from Councillors Burgess, Caluori and Ozdemir.

230 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. A2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

231 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. A3)

There were no declarations of interest.

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

The Chair stated that answers to questions raised at the December meeting had been sent to members. If there were any queries about the responses, members could contact the Democratic Services Officer.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 January 2021 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

233 CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. A5)

The Chair reported that she had just attended a meeting about how Covid-19 had affected young people. There had been good representation from young people, including the Young Mayor. The points raised mirrored the evidence submitted to the committee.

The chair thanked members and officers for their contributions towards the scrutiny recommendations.

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

None.

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

None.

236 **SCRUTINY REVIEW - DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS (ITEM NO. B1)**

The Chair presented the foreword and recommendations.

In the presentation, the following points were made:

- The committee had heard that COVID-19 had increased anxiety particularly in babies and parents; it had had the largest impact on the most disadvantaged and parents had had a greater role in supporting learning with many also juggling work. No family had escaped the impacts of COVID-19.
- Building partnerships beyond Islington was important.
- The recommendations had been divided into sections, namely Mental Health and Wellbeing, Learning and Pedagogy, Funding, Communications and Developments post-COVID.
- Opportunities for post-16 year olds and vulnerable post-24 year olds had diminished dramatically in the economic climate and addressing their needs was vital.
- Staff who had been dealing with bereavement in schools and settings could suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, too.
- Islington was densely populated and had a low percentage of green spaces so the recommendation to ensure parks were child and play friendly would benefit families.
- The Department for Education (DfE) had provided fewer Chromebooks than expected.
- Some families struggled with home schooling as English was their second language, they had poor literacy or did not have the necessary skills.
- Headteachers considered that undertaking interactive remote learning had increased teachers' skills and blended learning could be used in the future.
- Many children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) did not thrive under a regime of online learning and schools had responded by providing paper copies of work and having pupils continue in school.
- The council had lost income during the pandemic and more government funding was required. The recommendations sought to develop wider partnerships to campaign for more funding. There was a need to sustain Bright Start and independent/voluntary nurseries, too, were at risk.
- Input into levelling up for the most disadvantaged was required.
- Some anxiety had been caused by sudden changes of plan e.g. in relation to school closures. Alerting people as far in advance as possible would help to reduce anxiety.

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- Resetting the education system to put well-being at the centre was encouraged. It was important to give children and young people experiences with less pressure and more enjoyment. COVID-19 could be used as a vehicle for reassessing the education system and providing more creative and sporting opportunities as well as reducing assessment pressure.

RESOLVED:

That the recommendations be noted.

237

EXECUTIVE MEMBER QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. B2)

Councillor Ngongo presented the Executive Member update. She thanked officers for their assistance and outlined her priorities as follows:

- To help to support families. Islington Council had bought 100 books for each of the Mother Tongue Supplementary Schools.
- To have a youth platform to bring young people together and discuss their needs. The first meeting had been held and had been well attended. The meetings would take place monthly and the young people would decide the topic for each meeting.
- To have a platform for parents to enable the council to work with them. The first meeting would be held in April and committee members could attend.
- To reduce school exclusions. Councillor Ngongo thanked officers for their work on this.

Councillor Ngongo advised that officers had worked in collaboration to support the family of the boy tragically murdered in Hillrise ward.

Councillor Ngongo responded to the submitted questions as follows:

Question

The recent report from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman - Careless: Helping to Improve Council Services to Children in Care sets out a number of areas of poor practice by councils in dealing with looked after and care experienced children and young people. They identified complaints in a number of areas such as failure to consult or inform children and young people about key events affecting them, care planning, placement stability, contact arrangements, children leaving care and accommodation for 16/17 year olds.

Alongside this, the Secretary of State has just announced that it will be illegal from September for councils to put children under the age of 16 into accommodation that was not regulated by Ofsted. This does not protect 17 year olds.

Can the Executive Member confirm that Islington Council has not been guilty of any of the poor practice as described in the Ombudsman's report and that it does not use unregulated homes for its 16 and 17 year olds?

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Response

Councillor Ngongo stated that the council did not use unregulated homes for under 16s. Unregulated homes were only used in the very short term where there was no other option. In 2020/21, this provision was not used at all. The council's priority was the safety of young people and when this provision was used safety plans were in place and OFSTED had to be contacted in writing to scrutinise the placement.

Question

In recent reports, both to the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee and to Policy and Performance, we have heard about the rise in domestic violence cases against women and their children during the pandemic. Can the Executive Member give us an update on the figures for the past half term of lockdown and a breakdown of the different communities affected?

Response

Councillor Ngongo stated that in the year up to February 2021, there were 2,528 reported cases compared to 2,516 in the previous year. The council supported these families and in January 2021 meetings looking at domestic abuse and actions had been set up and these would continue. The figures of domestic violence cases had remained stable in the most recent lockdown and there was a similar number of cases across ethnicities. Councillor Cutler asked for a breakdown of ethnicity figures and an officer confirmed this could be provided.

Question

During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns has Islington seen an increase in children and young people joining gangs and a corresponding increase in the juvenile crime rate?

Response

Councillor Ngongo stated that young people's crime had fallen in the borough last year and the council had a team working with the police to respond to issues and reduce crimes further. To have even one death was a tragedy. An officer advised that there had not been an increase in young people joining gangs and instances of the most serious crimes had been reducing in the last few years. However, there had been three arrests for serious offences in the last few months. Wraparound support was provided and the Integrated Gangs Team worked closely with offenders.

Question

Does Islington Council monitor under-16 year old pregnancies? If so, has there been an increase in these rates during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Answer

Councillor Ngongo stated that the council was still waiting for data. During the first lockdown, birth registration was suspended and once it reopened there was a backlog.

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Further questions were asked at the meeting and the following responses were given:

- In response to a question about lateral flow testing in schools, Councillor Ngongo stated that help was being provided to schools and young people. In a meeting with young people, some said they did not want to be tested. It was important to motivate them to keep young people and teachers safe.
- In response to a question about attendance since schools reopened on 8 March, an officer advised that attendance in the schools that had been contacted was very good. In special schools, only those who were extremely clinically vulnerable were not attending. An officer had attended a number of schools to check how drop-offs were working. Where the People Friendly Streets initiative was in place, this made dropping off children safer for families and social distancing easier.
- An officer advised that there were 10 secondary schools in the borough and there was a rolling approach with children being tested before attending school. There was a team of support staff to aid testing.
- A member raised concern about parents gathering in groups outside schools and not always wearing masks. An officer advised that work had been undertaken with schools but she could be contacted with specific details and would raise this with the headteacher and if necessary send officers to advise parents.
- In response to a question about whether home learning resources would remain online, an officer advised that the primary resources would be refreshed. Children could access the resources for any year group if they wished. Online music provision would continue. The lockdown music festival would start in the spring. In terms of the World of Work, employers would be asked to continue to provide virtual opportunities up until September 2021.
- A member of the public asked about how concerned the council was about false positive lateral flow tests in schools and the effect on children's attendance. An officer stated that this was a national issue and a written answer would be sought from the public health team.
- A member of the public asked whether parents could act as wardens to ensure social distancing took place at school drop offs and collections. An officer advised that there was a floating resource that could be sent out if problems were reported.
- A member of the public asked about the use of the facilities in local libraries and youth hubs to assist those in digital poverty. An officer advised that libraries would be able to open from 12 April with PCs and study space open. The council had tried to keep youth spaces open, in particular for vulnerable young people and these spaces were currently open.

Councillor Ngongo was thanked for her update and answers to the questions asked.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Executive Member update and the answers to questions be noted.

2) That a breakdown of ethnicity figures in relation to domestic violence cases be sent to Councillor Cutler.

3) That a written answer be sought from the public health team and sent to the member of the public who asked about how concerned the council was about false positive lateral flow tests in schools and the effect on children's attendance.

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CHILDREN'S SERVICES QUARTER 3 2020/21 PERFORMANCE REPORT
(ITEM NO. B3)

Officers from Children's Services presented the Quarter 3 2020/21 Performance Report.

In the presentation, the following points were made:

- The percentage of young people triaged that were diverted away from the criminal justice system and the number of first-time entrants into the Youth Justice System had exceeded the target figures.
- The percentage of repeat young offenders was lower than most London boroughs.
- There had not been many custodial sentences. Most of these sentences were given to Black and minority ethnic young people and work was taking place with the local magistrates court to address this. Magistrates were provided with a paragraph to consider before sentencing which reminded them of the overrepresentation of BAME people given custodial sentences. There had been successes with the local court but this was more difficult with other courts as there was not the same relationship.
- A member asked whether county lines was still a problem and an officer advised that there were still organised crime groups exploiting children and, although this was more of an issue in rural areas particularly in lockdown, it was still a problem in urban areas. The council was working with partners to address this.
- Data analysis showed the overrepresentation of referrals of Black and mixed heritage ethnic groups. This was being submitted to the Islington Safeguarding Children Board for partners to consider and investigate further.
- Re-referrals to Children's Social Care within the previous 12 months had increased. Some re-referrals were happening more quickly as the intervention during the first lockdown was not as intensive or robust due to the pandemic, therefore families were more likely to require further intervention.
- Placement stability i.e. the proportion of looked after children with three or more placements over the course of a year was 8.4% in Quarter 3 last year but was now 9.4%. This was still below the London Average. Work was taking place to try and improve this and stabilise children in their placements.
- Long term placement stability had decreased and was below the London average. There were more children in care and more in court proceedings.

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- The number of looked after children had increased partly due to the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) being higher than in other boroughs and delays in court proceedings also contributed.
- Attendance at early years settings of 2 year olds was 70% in the autumn term. This was the highest it had been. However take up could rise and fall very quickly and there was a need for continued focus.
- Approximately 3,500 3-4 year olds attended early years settings in Quarter 3 which was lower than the pre-COVID level of attendance. Although attendance of 3-4 year olds was non-statutory, attendance impacted upon educational outcomes throughout a child's school life.
- The figures for supporting 16 and 17 year olds to stay in education, employment or training were better than in the last two years. Most support could not take place face-to-face and relationships had been built over the phone or using video conferencing. Many parents and students were concerned about prospects in light of the economic situation and had sought help. Headteachers had responded well and there was now a much improved relationship with the college.
- The increase in home educated young people presented a challenge in establishing contact.
- There had been an increase in demand for World of Work placements and a decision had been taken to focus on secondary schools before rolling out the programme to primary schools.
- The 11 by 11 programme had been developed to provide online and live streamed cultural experiences. One of these included a screening of The Gruffalo which reached between 7,000 and 8,000 children.
- A meeting had taken place with 30 cultural leaders who were willing to assist with work opportunities.
- In response to a member's question about the number of those being home educated and how they could be engaged, an officer stated that the number had gone up to 274. The local authority and schools were looking at the arrangements and talking to parents to ensure they were making an informed choice. There was a safeguarding concern as some children were not being seen. Six safeguarding leads from schools had volunteered to help the local authority complete assessment work more quickly. All transition points were being targeted. At Christmas, 300 children who were being home educated returned to school.
- A member of the public asked if those who had applied for free schools meals but been unsuccessful were supported in any other way. An officer stated that those just above the threshold were offered support e.g. from We Are Islington and previously Manor Gardens.

Officers were thanked for their report.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

239

ASSESSMENT SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS 2021 (ITEM NO. B4)

Anthony Doudle and Jeff Cole, Heads of School Improvement presented the report on Assessment Support for School 2021.

In the presentation and discussion the following main points were made:

- All Early Years Foundation Stage and Primary assessments were cancelled in 2020.
- Education settings were required to complete an annual report to parents/carers.
- There was no publication of any school data as it had not been validated and there were no comparative data sets. Schools had used their data internally to identify priorities, develop catch-up plans and inform teaching and learning priorities.
- This year there would be a similar situation as schools were in lockdown from January to March 2021.
- The two year old progress check was a statutory assessment that should be carried out unless a provider was affected by Coronavirus restrictions. It was observation based and was important as it was often the first indication of children who required more support. Outcomes from the progress check were not reported to the local authority.
- The Early Years Foundation Stage profile at age five would not be mandatory again this year. The DfE guidance expected schools to use their "best endeavours" to carry out the assessment and provide information to parents and to Year 1 teachers.
- The service would assist schools to moderate data and would facilitate non-statutory small assessment cluster groups during the summer term. There would be a focus on specific underperforming groups.
- Primary assessments between April and July 2021 had been cancelled. There would be no data from Key Stage 1 teacher assessments and no SATs assessments at Year 6. The phonics screening check was partially undertaken in December but the June part was cancelled. The Year 4 multiplication check had been delayed for another year.
- Schools should continue using assessment to inform teaching, to enable them to give information to parents on their child's attainment in their statutory annual report and to support the transition of Key Stage 2 pupils to secondary school.
- The Standards and Testing Agency (STA) strongly encouraged schools to use past test papers in their assessment of pupils. The local authority would be providing guidance on which papers to use for Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. The local authority would also be supporting schools to administer the phonics check to those pupils who did not reach the threshold or were absent during the window due to illness or self-isolation.
- A non-statutory moderation event for primary schools could take place if permitted and this would meet public health requirements. Schools would be invited when pupils were on the borderline between Working Towards the Expected Standard/Expected/Greater Depth. There would be a focus on White UK disadvantaged and Black Caribbean pupils.

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- The 2021 GCSEs had been cancelled. Last year 12,600 had taken part in the consultation on replacing exams and 1,939 of these were from students. This year there had been more than 94,700 responses to the consultation. This was the biggest response to a DfE consultation ever: 46,918 of these responses were from students.
- The local authority would ensure that timely support was given to schools and would also provide moderation support. Schools would be reminded about the unconscious bias work undertaken in 2020 and would offer further training where this had not yet happened to support teacher assessment.
- In response to a question about the appeals process, an officer advised that the student would appeal to the school first and the school would decide if the procedures were followed and, if not, could change the grade. If the student was not happy with the school's decision, they could appeal to the exams board. Evidence and procedures would be considered and the exam board could change the grade where appropriate.
- A member asked how much assessment was based on work undertaken during lockdown as some would have been unable to engage e.g. those with SEND or those who were in digital poverty. An officer stated that the assessment would be based on the level each young person was at now and where they had been for a period of time. Advice was to use evidence right up to the assessment and some schools were using additional papers as evidence. There would be a period of time in which appeals could be made.
- In response to a question from a member of the public about whether there was a scheme to get every young person registered with the library service, an officer advised that libraries had an important role. The Get Islington Reading programme was a partnership formed to encourage reading. The Summer Reading Challenge was a programme led by schools and libraries. More than 3,000 children would be invited to sign up in school.
- In response to a question from a member of the public about the possible grade inflation this year, an officer stated that it was not known.

Officers were thanked for their report.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

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ISLINGTON SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD: ANNUAL REPORT (ITEM NO. B5)

Alan Caton, Independent Chair and Scrutineer of the Islington Safeguarding Children Board (ISCB), presented the Annual Report.

In the presentation and discussion the following main points were made:

- The report was a new style of report based on the first year working under the new safeguarding arrangements whereby the Metropolitan

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Police Service, the NHS Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and Local Authority were jointly responsible for safeguarding. They worked collaboratively and challenged one another.

- Much good work was undertaken in Islington.
- Work would be undertaken to engage even better with schools. An education sub-group had been set up to ensure that all schools, colleges and other educational settings could be fully involved in the new safeguarding arrangements.
- A number of child safeguarding practice reviews had taken place. It was important to learn from them and improve systems to improve outcomes. Actions were embedded into front line practice.
- Work had taken place to ensure the voices of children and young people were heard in relation to the services they received.
- Work would continue to address neglect, harm suffered to children who lived where domestic violence took place, or where there was mental ill-health or substance misuse.
- Work would continue with young people at risk of being involved in serious violence, gangs and/or criminal exploitation.
- The key messages on Pages 71-72 of the report were highlighted.
- There were disproportionate funding contributions with the local authority paying more and the police paying less. Negotiations would be taking place as contributions should be equal across the three lead organisations.
- In response to a question from a member of the public about alcohol and drug misuse of parents and how this was dealt with, an officer advised that an assessment of the young person's safety took place and, where appropriate, plans were put in place to improve parenting. One to one and group interventions could take place. The PSHE curriculum in schools was being updated to improve knowledge and understanding so that young people could become more empowered.
- Emerging threats included domestic violence, the impacts of lockdown and elective home education.
- The Chair commented positively on the new format and requested that it would be useful in future to have a glossary included with the report.

Alan Caton was thanked for his report.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the report be noted.
- 2) That the key messages on pages 71-72 of the report be noted.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.25 pm

Chair