

London Borough of Islington
Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Thursday, 14 September 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Thursday, 14 September 2023 at 7.00 pm.

Present:	Councillors:	Bossman-Quarshie (Vice-Chair, in the Chair), Craig, Jegorovas-Armstrong, North, Ogunro, Pandor and Zammit
Also Present:	Councillors	Ngongo
	Co-opted Members	Mary Clement, Roman Catholic Diocese Jon Stansfield, Parent Governor Representative (Primary)

Councillor Valerie Bossman-Quarshie in the Chair

- 129 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. 1)**
Apologies were received from Zaleera Wallace and Councillor Sheila Chapman.
- 130 **DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. 2)**
There were no declarations of substitute members.
- 131 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. 3)**
There were no declarations of interest.
- 132 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (ITEM NO. 4)**
RESOLVED:
That the minutes of the meeting held on 19th July 2023 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.
- 133 **CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. 5)**
The Chair referred to national news reports regarding the safety of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) in public buildings and invited the Executive Member to inform the Committee that there had been only one school in the borough that been affected by RAAC, St Aloysius College. The school remained open as the presence of RAAC was only found to be in a limited quantity in one part of the building, which remains cordoned off until remediation works can be completed.

The Chair noted that this Committee meeting would be the last for two of its serving co-opted members, Jon Stansfield and Zaleera Wallace, and expressed thanks on behalf of the Committee for their service.
- 134 **EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (ITEM NO. 6)**
None.
- 135 **ITEMS FOR CALL IN (IF ANY) (ITEM NO. 7)**

None.

136 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. 8)

Questions were received from a member of the public, in advance of the meeting, and responses to these were being provided in writing.

137 QUARTER 1 PERFORMANCE REPORT (ITEM NO. B1)

The Committee moved to consideration of the first item, the Quarter 1 Performance report. In the discussion, the following points were raised:

- Responses to the Committee's outstanding queries from the Committee for the Quarter Four report, had been embedded within this report.
- The Committee were told that with regard to resilient children and families, the performance on social care indicators remained high.
- The Committee were told that with regards to the inequalities monitoring measure for children and young people of Black Caribbean heritage, the re-referral rate had been reduced to below the average for Q1, as a result of targeted work by officers.
- The Committee were told that there had been an overall reduction in the number of looked-after children, even when excluding the cohort of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, due to concerted efforts to solve issues within families and communities, and wraparound families in different and innovative ways.
- It was noted that Islington had always been above its quota with regard to unaccompanied asylum seeker children. A recent reassessment by the Home Office of the appropriate capacity for each hotel room, meant that there were new vacancies at hotels within the borough. Unaccompanied asylum-seeker children needed to be looked after until they could be age assessed. While this did have an impact on service delivery it was not to the extent that it had been in previous years, and not to the extent of the situation faced by other councils.
- In response to questions from the Committee, officers advised that youth engagement rates had increased to pre-Covid levels at the borough's youth centres and hubs, but the number of contacts had not. While Islington had a more comprehensive offer than most local authorities, officers acknowledged the need to better promote it. Previously, data had suggested that children of the Kurdish, Turkish, Cypriot, Somali, and Bengali communities were not being adequately reached, but this had improved following concerted efforts to address this. Officers were focusing on going out into communities to engage with young people rather than expecting them to attend in-person. Prospects had been contracted to fulfil some outreach work, as did Jigsaw for localised issues in the Highbury area. Engagement work at the Rose Bowl Youth Centre, Andover & Elthorne estates were also highlighted.
- In response to questions from the Committee regarding the average length of care proceedings and young people moving more regularly as part of assessment process, officers advised that Covid had led to huge delays in the court process, and in-turn delaying permanency for the children affected to which legal officers had written to the High Court highlighting the effect it was having on the borough's children. Officers had since been in receipt of a letter from the president of the Family Division, stating its intention to prioritise the cases of younger children.
- In response to questions from the Committee, officers advised that the report data was lagged, and data outcomes were routinely being filtering through the

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - 14 September 2023

lens of children with poorer outcomes, but the report did capture live data, which showed that the live suspension rate was lower than it had been in the last five years. The significant improvement in current data was attributed to targeted intervention for cohorts that had been a cause for concern. Officers also noted that for the primary school data, there were two primary schools with really high suspension rates that somewhat skewed the data and who officers were actively working with to reduce that.

- In response to questions from the Committee concerning incorporating the feedback of young people into the youth offer, officers informed members that this was indeed important and when recently redesigning the youth offer in the north of the borough, officers went into schools and community spaces to find out what young people needed. Officers also advised that youth workers were encouraged to elicit feedback from young people, and the Executive Member also noted that the service always worked side by side with young people to ensure their voice was heard.
- The service's current practice was that children's voices were at the heart of every aspect of what it does.
- In response to the Committee's request for any benchmarking on the borough's electively home-educated children that could be compared with statistical neighbours, officers advised that this could be provided, and noted that since the last meeting of the Committee, officers had explored about flexi-learning. Islington had over 300 electively home-educated children, the equivalent of approximately £1.9million pounds of school funding. Flexi-learning would involve the child being educated on a part-time basis by the school, resulting in the restoration of funding for that child to the school, as well as increased oversight of that child, and providing the opportunities for them to socialise. Officers were looking to pilot this model with one of the borough's schools.
- In response to members' concerns that children's voices were potentially being missed in the design of youth provision on housing estates and in parks, officers advised that they had been working closely with services across the council, including the Community Wealth Building directorate, to ensure that they were responsive to the voice of children and young people.
- Officers advised the Committee that the main reason for non-attendance was illness. To address this issue, officers brought together sixteen primary schools at Robert Blair Primary for a session to share best practice. In organising the session, officers broke from previous convention and brought together schools that had a different range of issues, rather than forming a group all facing the same issue, so that there could be greater learning and knowledge-sharing. The issue most highlighted from the session was parental mental health.
- Members were reminded that Islington had a parent carer forum, and the Parent Champions Network where support was available too. An evaluation report had been completed by London Metropolitan University and launched at City Hall, which captured the work of the Parent Champions Network.
- The Committee were advised that the offer of free childcare to two-year-olds, was a nationally targeted, nationally means-tested offer. Islington had spent over £5 million subsidising childcare above and beyond the criteria set by government. Some communities remained underrepresented in the offer, but targeted work was underway to address that.
- The Committee were informed that there was a daily, cross-agency meeting dedicated to ensuring better outcomes for survivors of domestic abuse. Members expressed an interest for officers to return to the Committee with further information on the Council's strategy to protect young girls and women.

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - 14 September 2023

- Officers advised that there continued to be real difficulty with the availability of housing stock for the borough's care-experienced young people, with approximately 96 currently ready to move into permanent accommodation. Fifty 1-bed properties were allocated to the service each year and there was also a shortage of temporary accommodation within the borough leading to high numbers being temporarily housed out of the borough. Funding options remained open to all of these young people, some of whom may also be pursuing further and higher education and these young people should be assured that officers would support them at each stage of the process.
- Members commended officers on the percentage of young people that had been diverted away from the criminal justice system.

ACTION:

Officers to provide the Committee with comparative data on electively home educated children that could be benchmarked with statistical neighbours.

ACTION:

Officers to provide the Committee with the evaluation report that had been completed by London Metropolitan University.

138

CHILD PROTECTION ANNUAL REPORT (ITEM NO. B2)

The Committee moved to consideration of the second item, the Child Protection annual report. In the discussion, the following points were raised:

- The Committee were told that the motivational practice model was highlighted in the report, as it was believed it was effective in reducing child in need rates and re-referral rates; and that actions addressing disproportionality / disparity were beginning to have an effect.
- In response to questions from the Committee concerning whether those that needed help were receiving it, officers advised that there more families were going to early help than the contact team. On average between 10 and 20% of contacts to the contact team will lead to social care intervention.
- Officers advised that in circumstances where a child was not seen alone or in their assessment, a manager was consulted who would take the decision about whether it was appropriate to override parental agreement for officers to attend the necessary settings to assess the child's lived experience; or would take the decision that this action was not proportionate at this time and consult someone in the network, advising that as access had not been granted to this child, additional monitoring of them was required.
- Officers were working with partner agencies to address disproportionality and disparity. The Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership now have a task and finish group to address this issue specifically.
- The Committee were also informed of the cross-London 'Black Adoption Project', which sought to address why it takes longer for a mixed/dual ethnicity child to move in with their adopted family.
- In response to the Committee's observation that parenting capacity had overtaken domestic violence as the main reason for contacts, officers stated this was unusual and possibly had stemmed from the impact of the pandemic on parental capacity. While there were contact reason codes encompassing parental mental health, substance abuse, officers would not label that as the referral reason without getting to know the family first.
- The Committee were told that officers were now undertaking quarterly audits of children that were on repeat child protection plans.

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - 14 September 2023

- In response to questions from members about where absent children were, officers advised that there were new expectations on attendance and every school had an action plan, was RAG rated and had an identified lead within the local authority to challenge and review practice. Officers had also worked to identify of schools that had patterns and groups where absences were below 50%. Altogether, officers were able to identify where absent children were on an individual basis in most instances.
- Officers confirmed that it was the case as per paragraph 6.5 of the report, that as the sibling group grows larger there was more likelihood of them being able to be placed together, albeit in out-of-borough placements.
- Members of the Committee highlighted the Council's family support services for praise, citing that the communities that were engaging with it, had been very complimentary of its' people-focused approach. Officers attributed this to the practice model / relationship-based practice and will feedback to Bright Start and Bright Futures.
- The Committee expressed its thanks to officers for their work in protecting the borough's children and young people and highlighted that the report demonstrated extraordinary levels of practice.

ACTION:

Officers to circulate presentation from Child Protection training.

139

HEADLINE/PROVISIONAL SCHOOL RESULTS (ITEM NO. B3)

The Committee moved to consideration of the third item, the Headline/Provisional School Results. In the discussion, the following points were raised:

- The Committee were told a more updated, granular report will be available around February 2024.
- This year was the first time that direct comparisons could be made for the Key Stage Four secondary results with 2019. In the intervening years, teacher assessments, and national formulas had been used to calculate results, but for this academic year, young people were able to sit their exams as usual. Officers stressed that the Council can be incredibly proud of its secondary school children in terms of the results achieved. This cohort was the most disrupted by COVID-19, having been in and out of school since Year 8, yet have achieved results that were 6% above what they were in 2019.
- The Committee were informed that in most areas of A-Levels, there had been increases in attainment.
- The Committee were reminded that in October 2022, the Council signed off an ambitious education plan, in which the aims were not just to look at attainment but barriers to education as well. Some of the borough's schools however were going through really significant financial challenges, with some projected to have deficits, and this was an important item of context to consider.
- In terms of challenges, officers were prioritising support for those children that are vulnerable and/or struggle to perform as well as others, through initiatives such as inclusion pathways.
- Officers were working on bringing schools together to collaborate, share best practice, and foster an inclusive culture across all Islington schools.
- Officers told the Committee that there had been national issues with this year's SATs examination, as the vocabulary used in some of the question papers was unfamiliar to many students, including Islington's, as it did not lend itself to their life experiences. This was particularly the case for the reading papers. There was a combination of schools in Ofsted's inspection window (21 at the

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - 14 September 2023

time of the Committee meeting) that had been highlighted as requiring extra support.

- Officers requested that the Committee recognise not only the achievements but also the development towards joining up inclusion, school organisation and the education plan, with a clear focus on vulnerable children, and also to note the variability across the schools.
- On the Attainment 8 measure, Islington's schools exceeded pre-pandemic levels in 2023, with over 50% making an improvement since 2019.
- Educational outcomes for Special Educational Needs (SEN) students exceeded national measures.
- Committee members noted that there was significant variance for school four in the Attainment 8 measure, to which officers advised that while there was a gap between this and the other schools, the added value to school four's progress was considerable. School four was said to have had a challenging cohort and students in Year 11 were performing more strongly than where they were in Year 7. Some of the higher performing schools in Attainment 8 may have had a more academic cohort, thus the variance in added value.
- Committee noted that on the outcomes for vulnerable groups, the "Increase the percentage of children reading at age 7" target was lower for 2024 than what was achieved in 2023, to which officers advised that the target had been pulled from the Education Plan and had been set at what was felt was achievable, but accepted that in line the Council's ambitions, this could be more aspirational.
- Although Islington was currently in line with national targets, there was an aspiration to be more in-line with inner London.
- The Committee congratulated the young people, officers and all involved in achieving these results.

ACTION:

Officers to ensure that in the full report to be presented to Committee in February 2024, there is a segment for the performance of electively home-educated children.

ACTION:

Officers to provide the mean for the Attainment 8 measure used for Islington's schools.

140

WORK PROGRAMME 2023-24 (ITEM NO. B4)

Noted.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.17 pm

Chair