

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 14 July 2015 at 6.30pm

### WRITTEN MINUTES – PART A

**Present:** Councillor Sara Bashford (Chairman)  
Councillors Sean Fitzsimons (Vice-Chairman), Jamie Audsley, Margaret Bird,  
Simon Brew, Bernadette Khan and Andrew Pelling

James Collins, Parent Governor representative  
Elaine Jones, Diocesan representative

**Also in attendance:**

Martin Williams, Beatrice Focher and Angie Gayle (Foster Carers' Association)

**A28/15 Apologies for absence (Agenda item 1)**

Apologies were received from Cllr Matthew Kyeremeh, Dave Harvey and Vinoo John.

**A29/15 Minutes of the meeting held on 16 June 2015 (Agenda item 2)**

**RESOLVED THAT:**

- The minutes of the meeting held on 16 June 2015 be signed as a correct record with the following amendments:

1 - 'The only objection to doing so was the heavy traffic on the A235

2 - **DELETE** the following words: *'They added that the existence of 20 mile an hour limits had helped to foster a "walking culture".'*

- The following conclusions drawn up by members be turned into recommendations to Cabinet:

- A protocol for notifying ward councillors of proposals for new schools or changes to schools at their earliest stage should be drawn up and implemented

- The council should adopt a fresh approach to school place planning including in-year planning, to provide places at or near the locations where the demand is greatest

- The council should investigate effective options for encouraging faith schools to increase their offer of school places

- More efforts need to be made by the council to encourage and facilitate the use of walking, cycling and public transport to new schools

**A30/15 DISCLOSURE OF INTEREST (Agenda item 3)**

There were no new disclosures.

**A31/15 URGENT BUSINESS (Agenda item 4)**

There was none.

**A32/15 EXEMPT ITEMS (Agenda item 5)**

The sub-committee agreed that report B1 be discussed under Part B of the agenda in accordance with paragraph 7 of Schedule 12a of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) - *information relating to any action or to be taken in connection with the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime.*

**A33/15 Fostering and adoption services in Croydon (agenda item 6)**

The following officers were in attendance for this item:

- Ian Lewis, Director, Children & Family Early Intervention and Children's Social Care
- Paul Chadwick, Head of looked after children)
- Spencer Duvwiama (Delivery manager - foster care)

Officers introduced this agenda item by drawing distinctions between fostering and adoption services. Members heard that fostered children were in the care of the local authority and that the council had corporate parent responsibility whereas adopted children had been taken out of the care of the local authority and were the responsibility of their adoptive parents. Officers explained that there were similarities in the assessment and approval process for both services. In addition, it was highlighted that some foster carers applied to be adopters and that, when individuals apply to adopt a child, officers suggest "fostering to adopt".

Officers stated that considerable improvements had been made to fostering and adoption services over the past 3-4 years, leading to an increase in the number of foster carers and adopters. 200 children were now in foster care and 29 children had been adopted in the last year. They also explained that there was a national drive to increase the number of children adopted from care, and that the government was encouraging the establishment of regional adoption agencies.

Members noted the considerable difference in the cost of in-house and independent foster placements as stated in paragraph 2.3 of the report and asked whether there was any pressure to use in-house services to keep costs down. Officers gave assurances that financial considerations

were not central to deciding where a child was to be placed and that the courts decided on placements purely in the child's best interests.

Members were advised that a Business Relationship Team were responsible for organising placements on the basis of reports from social workers and a description of the children's needs. If an in-house placement is deemed to be in the child's best interest, the Team can liaise with any one of 35 agencies to select the appropriate placement for the child. This decision is not based on cost. If the child has challenging needs, there may be an extra cost involved in providing the appropriate foster placement for him/her.

Members questioned officers on the structure of the fostering service. They were advised that the London Borough of Croydon had adopted the "Systemic Family Therapy" model following Professor Munro's review of child protection and that this model of fostering services was heavily reliant on the role of the "consultant practitioner", whose outcome focused objective was to reflect on what service was best for the family. Officers stated that the delivery manager for foster care supervised two unit managers and 21 social workers whose role was to manage and support foster carers.

Questioned regarding discrepancies in standards of support and supervision, officers explained that quality control had improved after the commencement of the new fostering contract. In addition, workshops with foster carers and surveys of children in placement were organised to ascertain areas for improvement, leading to clear standards and expectations of social workers and foster carers. Members asked whether foster carers' views were taken into account in service improvements and were informed that this was not happening as much as they would like, although it had to be recognised that the high retention of foster carers (96.7%) was an indicator of satisfaction on their part.

Foster carers commented that they felt that basic "day to day" needs were the main issue for them and that this was not being addressed. For instance, two requests for changes had been made at the AGM of the Foster Carers' Associations and had not yet been replied to. In addition, foster carers reported an inconsistency of support and messages from social workers as a result of a high turnover of staff. However, it was acknowledged that allowances had been kept in line with those of other local authorities, which was appreciated by foster carers.

Asked what support foster carers would like to have that they were not currently receiving, they replied that they would appreciate having good policies and accessing them online. They observed that many social workers' knowledge of these was patchy. They reported that the deadline for posting policies online had been repeatedly postponed, and that the baby payment policy and savings policy were inconsistent. Foster carers added that they regularly experienced frustration regarding little problems which did not get resolved by social workers. They felt that social workers were good but significantly overstretched.

Officers stated that the 2012 Ofsted inspection of fostering services had acknowledged these inconsistencies and sympathised with the foster carers' frustrations. They explained that the government had revised standards for foster carers, shifting the emphasis away from the foster carer and around the child. They added that a scheme of allowances for foster carers had been published in 2012 and been presented at the Council's Corporate Parenting Panel, and that a revised scheme was due to be published. In addition, a foster carer's handbook had been produced and later revised by a consultant brought in specially for this purpose, and was now available online.

Members discussed the out of hours emergency duty service and stated that it was very difficult to get through to this service to resolve a crisis with foster children. They were advised that a fast track route to the emergency duty team was available in particularly acute crises. In addition, officers were exploring a possible model of support whereby foster carers would be supervised and supported in groups, which could also provide mutual support. A similar model had been adopted with social workers and proved very successful. Officers planned to hold a workshop with foster carers on this proposed model.

Members questioned officers regarding Special Guardianship Orders, whereby a court appoints one or more individuals to be a child's "special guardian" They were advised that these could constitute an effective form of support and were less stigmatising than care orders. Officers stated that 41 Special Guardianship Orders were currently in place.

Members expressed concerns regarding cuts to the leaving care service, including the loss of the mentoring service for young people aged 18. They stressed the importance of providing support to this group of young people, without which they could become very vulnerable to crime and other issues. One particular issue flagged up by members was the extremely limited housing stock in the borough and landlords' reluctance to let property to young people.

Officers were asked about the anticipated level of cuts to services. They replied that they planned to address the cuts through a "Looking after the right children" approach, which involves the following:

- improving the early help offer to minimise the likelihood of children being taken into care
- threshold management to minimise entry into care
- making greater use of Special Guardianship Orders as well as family therapy and the family resilience service
- making the maximum use of in-house foster carers to minimise unit costs

Officers stated that they aimed to reduce the population of children in care from 395 to 320 by 2018 - a very ambitious target.

Members asked whether it was realistic for foster carers to expect improved support from social workers in the light of forthcoming cuts. Officers commented that improved services did not necessarily involve

higher costs. In addition, improved training and management of social workers could enable the council to retain a good workforce for longer.

Members discussed the “placement stability” of looked after children and heard that it was longer than 2.5 years and therefore above the national average. Officers added that the Placement Stability Panel met every two weeks to evaluate demands for change.

Officers were questioned on access to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) for looked after children. Members noted the length of the referral form (over six pages). They were advised that 78% of referrals for looked after children were accepted, with an average waiting time of 5.5 weeks, which was considerably less than for other children. Members heard that one foster carer was unable to access CAMHS services as the needs of the child concerned were below its threshold and so turned to the NSPCC’s “Face to Face” service. However, this service is now closing down. Another foster carer stated that only one of the children she had fostered in the last twenty years had been accepted by CAMHS.

Members asked whether the council was getting sufficient funding to cover services to unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people. They were advised that officers were currently renegotiating the terms of the grant as it did not cover all the costs to schools, health services and police. Officers explained that social workers’ work was covered by the grant but that indirect costs to management were not, and that the exact expenditure on unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people was hard to quantify.

Officers stated that in most cases, Croydon’s unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people had good outcomes, including good higher education qualifications, one exception to this trend being Albanian boys and young men, Senior social workers from Albania had come to Croydon to discuss their issues with the borough’s officers, and a range of solutions were being explored. It was suggested that very early intervention in the case of this particular group could perhaps “nip problems in the bud”.

Members asked officers regarding the number of police notifications involving looked after children in the last 12 months. Officers undertook to provide this information after the meeting.

Officers were thanked for their fulsome replies to members’ questions.

Members agreed that the key issues arising from this item were as follows:

- There is a lack of policies and of clear guidance and consistency in the support provided by social workers to support to foster carers
- Foster carers and their association(s) need to be consulted and involved in the development of policies and guidance to ensure that they meet foster carers’ needs

- Young people leaving care at the age of 18+ need to be well supported through the Staying Put strategy to ensure that they make a good start in adult life
- The capacity of the out of hours emergency duty team needs to be strengthened so that it can be easily accessed to address emergency situations encountered by foster carers
- Steps need to be taken to ensure that Croydon / the council receives adequate funding for all the services it provides to unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people in the borough

**A34/15 Responses to Scrutiny recommendations on children's safeguarding (agenda item 7)**

Members noted the report and expressed their disappointment at the rejection of the recommendation on appointing a safeguarding champion. They had hoped that a member could be appointed to this role.

Members asked for an additional explanation for the rejection of recommendation 5, which could be very easily implemented.

**A35/15 Scrutiny work programme (agenda item 8)**

The review conducted by Cllr Jamie Audsley in 2014-2015 was praised. Members commented that they were pleased to see that the review had been well received by the Cabinet.

Members approved the suggestion put forward by Cllr Kyeremeh for a mini-review on 'exclusions, health and other factors that may affect educational achievement among children in the north of the borough'.

The meeting ended at 9.22pm