

Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee

Meeting of held on Tuesday, 17 October 2017 at 6.30 pm in F10, Town Hall, Katharine Street,
Croydon CR0 1NX

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Jan Buttinger (Chair);
Councillor Sean Fitzsimons (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Sue Bennett, Margaret Bird, Maddie Henson, Bernadette Khan and
Andrew Rendle

Also Present: Councillor Alisa Flemming, Joy Prince and Andy Stranack

Apologies: Councillor Patricia Hay-Justice and Maria Gatland

PART A

33/17 **Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were given for Councillors Maria Gatland Patricia Hay-Justice, Dave Harvey, Elaine Jones and Leo Morrell.

34/17 **Minutes of the previous sub-committee meeting**

The minutes were agreed.

RESOLVED THAT: the minutes of the meeting held on 19 September 2017 be signed as a correct record.

Updates were provided on the following:

- Further to the Scrutiny recommendation made at the 19 September meeting to organise learning and development visits on children's services, an undertaking has been made to organise monthly sessions to enable members to follow the journey of children at risk to a better life
- It has now been agreed to carry out satisfaction surveys with children services staff, the results of which will be shared with scrutiny members.

35/17 **Disclosures of interest**

There were none.

36/17 **Urgent Business (if any)**

There were none.

Missing Children

The following officers were in attendance for this item:

- Barbara Peacock Executive Director (People)
- Philip Segurola, Interim Director, Early Help and Children's Social Care

A presentation was given on the recent Deep Dive on Missing Children, which covered the following areas:

- Strengths and areas requiring improvement
- An acknowledgement that front-line practice on missing children is underdeveloped
- Information on the work of the Improvement Board and planned Deep Dives
- Feedback on a recent programme of audits on current practice in addressing the needs and risks faced by missing children
- Planned improvements to services

Asked how many children were missing *at present*, officers replied that there were 24 looked after children currently missing, the majority of these unaccompanied asylum seeking children. They added that some had been missing for some time and that the council was working with its partners to find them. Officers stated that there were also 9 missing children who were not in care.

Officers explained that the police had two categories of absence:

- "Unauthorised absence": this covered children going missing for several hours
- "Missing children": this category covered children going missing for far longer periods

Members noted that the council accommodated looked after children from other boroughs. Officers were asked for the reasons why this was happening. They replied that this was due to issues of suitable accommodation in some boroughs or because the child might be housed with a relative who lived some distance away from his parents' home. They added that Croydon was popular with other boroughs because it provided good support to unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

Members were informed that the number of children in care was rising nationwide and that there had been a drop in adoptions. Many care leavers were also staying with their foster carers for longer under the "Staying Put" scheme. Overall, the borough does not have sufficient numbers of foster carers. Other boroughs housing looked after children in Croydon tend to use private fostering agencies, which charge about twice the cost of a person fostering Croydon's looked after children.

Officers highlighted the fact that gang culture was a key factor in children going missing.

Members asked whether social workers had the necessary skills to deal with the various challenges presented by missing children. Officers acknowledged that some social workers needed to improve their understanding of procedures relating to missing children and that there were issues with record keeping on Return Home Interviews (RHIs). It was explained that notes on such interviews were sometimes held as e-mails or in other formats, but not on the CRS system where they should be stored, and that some social workers thought that the NSPCC was in charge of carrying out all Return Home Interviews. Officers acknowledged that there was a clear need for greater consistency in record keeping.

Members asked whether new social workers were provided mentoring and support by their team. Officers acknowledged that induction and accountability both needed improving.

In answer to a question, Members were advised that it was particularly challenging to find and provide support to missing children who were not looked after by the council. They observed that missing children could be involved in “county lines”, whereby a group establishes and operates a telephone line with a mobile phone in order to get young people to sell drugs to users at street level in rural areas some distance away from their home address, such as coastal or market towns.

Officers stated that professional curiosity was a mark of an effective social worker, who would take all measures necessary to find out where a missing child was and to establish contact with them to ascertain what risks they were facing. Members felt that there was a need for social workers to display more tenacity in addressing children’s difficulties.

Members were given assurances that foster carers were also interviewed where the situation of the child warranted it.

Members questioned officers about motivation levels in social work teams and efforts made by managers to improve them. The Executive Director for People explained that senior officers met regularly to discuss such issues and that the recommendations of the Ofsted inspection had led to more open discussions on underlying problems. She added that such discussions were now beginning to yield positive results.

Members asked how officers tested whether efforts to change the culture had had a positive impact. They were advised that this was done through “poll surveys” with staff. In addition, a “staff reference group” was due to start working with the Improvement Board created in the aftermath of the inspection.

Officers stressed that it could take a long time for children’s services to progress from an “inadequate” rating to a “good” rating. In the case of Kent County Council, it had taken seven years.

Officers confirmed that only 23% of Return Home Interviews (RHIs) had been completed but that steps would be taken to improve the dashboard provided to members at the meeting. They acknowledged that the data provided on RHIs was excessively complicated and that they had a duty to keep the whole population informed, including Looked After Children.

Cllr Andy Stranack, who is a member of the Corporate Parenting Panel, gave out Department for Education statistics regarding missing children to all in attendance. The Cabinet Member undertook to take it away for examination. The Executive Director for People offered to discuss these figures at a future meeting of the sub-committee and to provide more context for the statistics to be provided.

Members noted that paragraph 4.4 of the report (page 17) stated that none of the relevant children's files contained minutes of the Missing/High Risk Panel meeting where their cases had been discussed. They sought assurances that the department would henceforth make sure that all procedures were followed scrupulously and that notes of meetings were recorded in the right place. They suggested that key officers should take responsibility for ensuring that this happened.

Members enquired about the support provided to children and young people with special educational needs. Officers stated that they only held records for those who had a formal statement of special educational needs.

Officers were asked whether Skype was used to conduct Return Home Interviews as young people were comfortable with the use of I.T. Officers felt that the interview should be held face to face and be a thorough discussion of the circumstances that led the child or young person to go missing.

Officers were asked how many children were currently missing education. They explained that new legislation which came into force in September 2016 (The Education (Pupil Registration) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2016) required schools to inform their local authority whenever a child of compulsory school age left a school before completing the school's final year or joined the school after the start of the first year, and to inform it of the date when they are about to delete a pupil's name from the admission register, thus ensuring an uninterrupted record of a child's progress through school or revealing any gaps in provision. One member noted that she knew of children who had been out of education for five years and been missed by monitoring systems.

Members asked for the presentation to be e-mailed to the Sub-Committee.

Officers were thanked for their report and fulsome replies to Members' questions.

RESOLVED: to note the report.

38/17 **Work Programme 2017-2018**

Members discussed the work programme for the 28 November subcommittee meeting.

The Chair asked for the new Chair of the Safeguarding Children Board, Di Smith, to be invited to attend the meeting. The Executive Director (People) confirmed that this would be done. The Chair also requested that the covering report for the Annual Report of the Safeguarding Board should give a description of her role as the Chair of the Board.

The Sub-Committee agreed to:

- Add an agenda item on statistics relating to missing children
- Postpone the item on youth employability to a later meeting – possibly in the following municipal year
- Have a briefing meeting on “Public Law Outline” and “Early Permanence” prior to the 28 November meeting and to request a written briefing on these two topics ahead of the briefing meeting, in order to gain a better understanding of these two items

The Sub-Committee also agreed that the Cabinet Member Question and Answer session for Cllr Alisa Flemming should be moved from the 6 February meeting to the 13 March meeting.

RESOLVED to:

- (i) Add an agenda item on statistics relating to missing children
- (ii) Postpone the item on youth employability to a later meeting – possibly in the following municipal year
- (iii) Have a briefing meeting on “Public Law Outline” and “Early Permanence” prior to the 28 November meeting and to request a written briefing on these two topics ahead of the briefing meeting, in order to gain a better understanding of these two items
- (iv) move the Cabinet Member Question and Answer session for Cllr Alisa Flemming from the 6 February meeting to the 13 March meeting.

39/17 **Updated Work Programme**

The meeting ended at 8.50 pm

Signed:

Date:

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