

MEETING OF THE

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 19 September 2017 at 6.30pm

WRITTEN MINUTES – PART A

Present: Councillor Jan Buttinger (Chairman)
Councillors Sean Fitzsimons, Maddie Henson, Bernadette Khan, Andrew Rendle and Andy Stranack

Elaine Jones, Diocesan co-optee
Dave Harvey, teacher representative co-optee

Also in attendance:

Councillor Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Learning

A26/17 Apologies for absence (agenda item 1)

There were no apologies.

A27/17 Disclosures of interest (agenda item 2)

There were none.

A28/17 Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 20 June 2017 (Agenda item 3)

The minutes were agreed.

RESOLVED THAT: the minutes of the meeting held on 20 June 2017 be signed as a correct record.

A29/17 Urgent business (agenda item 4)

There was none.

A30/17 Exempt Items (agenda item 5)

There were none.

A31/17 The Ofsted inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers (agenda item 5)

The following officers were in attendance for this item:

- Sarah Warman, Head of Commissioning and Improvement (People)
- Sarah Moorman, Director of Human Resources

The Cabinet Member gave an overview of action taken by the Council to tackle the issues highlighted in the Ofsted report. She reminded the Sub-Committee that Ofsted had made 21 recommendations on children's services, 19 of which related to front-line services.

The Cabinet Member advised members that both she and the Shadow Cabinet Member for Children and Young People would sit on the Improvement Board. She also confirmed that the Commissioner for Children's Services Eleanor Brazil would be monitoring the progress made on the Improvement Plan.

The Director of Human Resources outlined her role and reported on action taken to improve children's services. She stated that a lot of feedback had been obtained throughout the inspection, allowing the council to draw up a transitional action plan and to start implementing changes. A further two year Improvement Plan is to take over from the transitional plan to make significant improvements in children's services. The Director explained that the department would be carrying out a series of "deep dives" into areas of particular need and that the first one would focus on missing children, whose numbers are high in Croydon.

Members were advised that there had already been changes in personnel, with the appointment of a new Chair of the Safeguarding Children's Board and the replacement of the Director of Children's Services.

The Council will be required to produce a written "statement of account", the first draft of which is due to be sent to Ofsted by 3 October. Officers have been asked to ensure the action plan focuses on "the living experience of children". Ofsted is due to carry out a visit on 9 October to check on progress in improving children's services.

The teacher representative commented on the problems frequently experienced by schools in trying to access social worker support. He stated that he was encouraged that there was an Improvement Plan in place but emphasised the sense of urgency, explaining that children's social care services had been unavailable to help various pupils at risk in the borough on a number of occasions. He stated that teachers were very reluctant to call the police in such cases as they preferred to provide support to help children resolve a problem and engage with their education. He added that teachers had no issues about the professionalism of social workers but commented that there were too many delays and too high a turnover of social care staff. He hoped that improvements would progress apace so that no outside services would be called in to take over children's services.

The teacher representative highlighted the fact that the inspection report did not provide enough information on the causes underpinning poor performance in children's services and suggested that funding issues and increasing demand for services might have contributed to the problems described in the Ofsted report.

The Cabinet Member stressed the importance of the relationship between teachers and social workers. She explained that a high number of referrals to children's social

care came from schools and that social workers relied heavily on intelligence provided by schools.

The Cabinet Member echoed the teacher representative's concerns regarding increasing demand and funding issues. In particular, she stated that two letters had been sent to central government highlighting the insufficient levels of funding for unaccompanied asylum seeking children and had received no reply. She added that some short-term measures had been taken to improve matters but that the long-term prospects for resourcing services for these children's high needs were bleak.

In answer to members' concerns regarding the long-standing high turnover of social care staff, officers stated that efforts were being made to create a good working environment and an attractive package for prospective social workers, in order to improve recruitment and retention in response to Ofsted recommendations.

Members pointed out, however, that *agency* staff made their unique contribution to social work teams as they had worked in a number of different councils and brought fresh ideas to local practice.

The teacher representative stressed that he was keen to ensure unaccompanied asylum seeking children got all the support they needed despite significant funding issues. He remarked that these pupils were an asset to their schools and impressive role models to others in their classes as they overcame language barriers and other difficulties to achieve good results.

Members were pleased to hear that schools had representation on the Improvement Board. They raised concerns that referrals to social care from schools were often acknowledged but not followed up and stressed that action needed to be taken to tackle this trend. The Cabinet Member undertook to take up this issue with the Executive Director (People).

Members discussed issues relating to eligibility criteria for support services. They had come across a number of cases where schools felt such support was needed but social workers disagreed. Members stressed that if a child's needs escalated through lack of early support, the services needed to resolve his/her needs at an acute stage were usually far more costly. The Cabinet Member concurred that early help was essential to nip problems in the bud and gave assurances that work would be carried out on thresholds for support in line with Ofsted recommendations.

Members expressed concerns at the fact that children were appointed a new social worker at "transition points" in their lives and stressed the need for continuity of care. They were advised that children who were permanently looked after had far more stable support but children whose circumstances and status changed significantly were more likely to experience such changes. Officers agreed that the council needed to minimise change and that children and young people should only need to tell their story once in view of the stress association with this process.

Members enquired about the average case load of a social worker and were told that while they varied a lot, the average was about 16 cases per officer. Some frustration was expressed about the fact that work load issues had been discussed on a number of occasions by the sub-committee without leading to any subsequent improvements. Members stressed that the council's self-evaluation processes needed to be

improved to enable management to take appropriate action to tackle problems effectively.

The Cabinet Member also highlighted the need to improve information-sharing among partners and announced that a new principal social worker had been appointed to improve this and to provide better quality assurance. The Cabinet Member added that a “deep dive” might be carried out on the collection and use of data on children’s social care and services provided to them.

Members suggested that schools might have a role in educating parents on safeguarding issues through presentations at evening meetings. They observed that many black and ethnic minority parents did not have a good understanding of safeguarding issues but that this informal approach might help them to understand the child protection process better. The Cabinet Member welcomed this idea but stressed the important contribution churches and communities could make to help parents understand this better.

Members highlighted the fact that in their experience, many partners involved in multi-agency work did not understand council processes and thresholds and needed to be better involved in the process of developing support packages for children and young people. The Cabinet Member agreed that these relationships needed to be strengthened and that the relationships within the Children’s Safeguarding Board needed to be rebuilt, with improved engagement by partners in children’s plans. This includes disseminating information on the various elements of the Best Start initiative for children aged 0-5 years far more effectively.

Officers explained that a draft Improvement Plan was due to be presented to the Improvement Board on 3 October, prior to an Ofsted visit on 9 October and submission of the final plan in December. Two key challenges to be tackled in this work are 1) how to prioritise the work and 2) how to get assurances that the plan is having a real impact.

Councillors expressed some concerns regarding the Improvement Plan. Members felt confused by the fact that one part of the information given quoted work to be carried out on “three Ps”, People, Practice and Performance, while the Transitional Action Plan for the first three months after the inspection focuses on four areas, namely Strategic, Structural, Operational and Communication and that no explanation was given as to how the two action plans fitted together. Members stressed that the action needed to link in clearly with Ofsted recommendations and should be easily read by a layman so that all could understand how the council proposed to improve services and make a tangible difference to the circumstances and prospects of children at risk in the borough.

Members expressed serious concerns about the column in the report which relates to resources needed to implement improvements: they felt it contained very little information and a worrying number of rows showing “to be confirmed” or “not applicable”. They sought assurances that proposed actions would be affordable and sustainable. Officers stated that a Children’s Finance Group involving the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Learning and the Cabinet Member for Finance and Treasury was being set up to agree budgets and tracker systems to monitor expenditure on the Improvement Plan. Members were given assurances that the budget for improvements would be ring-fenced except for some expenditure on

services for 0-25 year old children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

Members heard that about two thirds of Ofsted inspections of children's services in the country had led to an "Inadequate" rating, which had led to a recognition that action needed to be taken nationally to improve matters. However, sub-committee members were told that no additional funding was forthcoming in the short term.

Officers announced that the Commissioner for Children's Services would be reporting on the monitoring of improvements in December and that her report would be a public document.

Members highlighted the need for a clear "line of sight" to the frontline of services and asked how this might be improved as many stakeholders were not part of children's services. They were advised that the Commissioner and the new chair of the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board would have a major role to play in this respect. As the Ofsted recommendations included one on the involvement of members as corporate parents, officers were asked how "line of sight" would be extended to councillors. The Cabinet Member stated that this was being addressed. Training on safeguarding had also become mandatory and efforts were being made to make it easier for councillors to be kept informed regarding the needs of looked after children and services being provided to them. It was observed, however, that the Transitional Action Plan contained very little in the way of improved councillor involvement, and the Cabinet Member agreed that this plan as well as the final Improvement Plan needed to include clarification on the engagement of Corporate Parents and participation in improvements.

Officers confirmed that the sub-committee would be involved in monitoring the Improvement Plan and the dashboard of statistics such as staff numbers and trends in complaints. They added that the statistics would be clear and easy to understand so that all stakeholders could interrogate it easily. Members stated that they would welcome the opportunity to carry out visits and talk to staff to gain a deeper understanding of children's needs and services available to them.

Members agreed that the Improvement Plan would be monitored at every meeting of the sub-committee during this municipal year.

Members asked for the up-to-date Improvement Plan to be circulated to the sub-committee. They also asked for a "Red Amber Green" column to be included in the plan so that progress could be followed more easily.

RESOLVED that:

1. The Sub-Committee consider the up-to-date Improvement Plan for children's services at every meeting of this municipal year
2. That the plan should include a "Red Amber Green" column so that progress can be followed more easily.
3. That learning and development visits should be organised in order to enable members to gain a better understanding of children's services and the needs of service users and enable them to monitor the quality of services more effectively

The Children's Workforce (Agenda item 7)

A presentation on the children's social care workforce was given by Sarah Moorman, Director of Human Resources.

This began with the observation made in the Ofsted inspection report of 4 September 2017 that

'The workloads of social workers in some teams are high and this presents a serious barrier to providing effective services for children. The turnover of staff in many teams, coupled with the many transition points, further inhibits the building of trusting relationships between social workers and children.'

The presentation went on to outline Ofsted recommendations relating to:

- the workforce data summary as at 17 June 2017
- the objectives of the workforce strategy
- progress made on workforce data collection and
- recent progress made on recruitment and retention.

Members were advised that data was being updated and monitored on a weekly basis.

In answer to a question, the Director of Human Resources stated that social workers' caseloads varied between 12 and 20 cases per officer.

Members discussed the employment of agency staff. They were advised that many social workers opted for this avenue as a career choice. Officers added that they were exploring ways of encouraging agency staff to become permanent council officers, such as short-term loans to secure housing and financial help with season tickets.

Officers stated that the council did not offer a sponsorship programme for students but ran a very good support package for new graduates wishing to take up a post as a social worker.

Members observed that schools with a low Ofsted rating struggled to recruit teachers and asked how the council would endeavour to override the poor Ofsted rating of children's services to attract new staff. The Director stated that many social workers lived in the borough and wanted to stay in their jobs, but that career development and employment benefits needed to be improved to secure better retention.

Members challenged officers to explain what real changes were taking place to improve retention. Members reminded them that the "in-house academy" set up in previous years had not yielded the hoped-for improvements in recruitment and retention. The Director replied that a service lead had been appointed to improve collaboration to increase recruitment and retention and to carry out more innovative recruitment drives.

Members remained unconvinced by the above reply and highlighted the poor line management recorded in the inspection report and its impact on staff as a possible cause of low retention. They felt that job satisfaction was an important

motivator and noted that there was no data available on this. Officers stated that such data might previously have been collected by human resources staff but this function had been significantly downgraded over the years, leaving little capacity to monitor job satisfaction levels. Members added problems with poor I.T. as another source of frustration and stress among social workers. It was also observed that having to attend panels to justify expenditure on particular children's support packages was an additional burden on staff.

The Director gave assurances that steps to improve business support, the work environment and I.T. issues had been included in the Improvement Plan. Members suggested that a "deep dive" be conducted into staffing problems to get a clear picture of the causes of poor recruitment and retention and realistic solutions.

The Director announced that staff were to be surveyed at the end of the year on their job satisfaction. Members enquired whether this survey would be carried out across the council or only among children's services staff. The director stated that it was directed at all council staff although some discussion had taken place as to whether a separate questionnaire should be designed for children's services staff. Members felt strongly that the latter should be prioritised in view of the Ofsted inspection outcomes and that clear information was needed as soon as possible on social services staff views regarding the strengths and weaknesses of working in children's services. The director undertook to share these views with senior management.

RESOLVED:

That consideration should be given to running a dedicated staff satisfaction survey with staff in the Council's children services to identify issues hampering recruitment and retention of staff and ensure that results are processed quickly and lead to swift improvements

The meeting ended at 9.15pm