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Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee

Meeting of held on Tuesday, 21 June 2022 at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall, Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

MINUTES

Present: Councillors Councillor Richard Chatterjee (Chair), Councillor Maddie Henson (Vice-Chair), Sue Bennett, Gayle Gander, Eunice O'Dame, Helen Redfern, Manju Shahul-Hameed and Catherine Wilson

Co-optee Members

Paul O'Donnell (Voting Parent Governor Representative)

Also

Present: Councillor Maria Gatland, Councillor Rowenna Davis

Apologies: Elaine Jones (Voting Diocesan Representative (Catholic Diocese))
Josephine Copeland (Non-voting Teacher representative)

PART A

26/22 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absences were received from Elaine Jones (Voting Diocesan Representative (Catholic Diocese)) and Josephine Copeland (Non-voting Teacher representative).

27/22 Minutes of Previous Sub-Committee Meetings

The minutes of the previous meetings held on the 18th January 2022, 9th March 2022 and 22nd March 2022 were approved as an accurate record.

28/22 Disclosures of Interest

Councillor Henson stated that they had previously held the role of Deputy Cabinet Member for Children and Young People.

29/22 Urgent Business (if any)

There was none.

30/22 Children, Young People and Education Directorate Overview

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 29 to 50 of the agenda along with a supplement, which provided an overview of the Children,

Young People and Education Directorate to inform the development of the Committee's work programme for the coming year. The report was introduced by the Corporate Director Children, Young People & Education by way of a short presentation. The Cabinet Member addressed the Committee and praised the work of the directorate in the context of tough conditions and welcomed questions from the Committee.

The Sub-Committee queried what officers were doing to identify 'hidden harm' and the Corporate Director Children, Young People & Education commented that 'hidden harm' was a term that had been coined early in the pandemic to address issues that had not been identified when face to face contact had been reduced which were only now being discovered. Manifestations of hidden harm could include school refusal, struggling at school and mental health difficulties; there was a wide-ranging Community based offer covering early intervention for mental health and a higher-level offer was being developed for those presenting at A&E departments. There was a focus on the early points of identification such as through health, community service and educational routes and there needed to be better understanding of other external factors such as the cost-of-living crisis and the end of the furlough scheme and how these increased pressures on families.

The Multi Agency Safeguarding hub (MASH) was increasingly being used to interpret data which helped to inform what services would be needed following a referral. A review of the 'Front Door' and of MASH activity was included in the directorate plan.

The Sub-Committee asked whether children in education settings had contact with services and had not stayed at home, and it was confirmed that this was the case with increased monitoring of children in elective home education; it was stated that it was important that families were not choosing elective home education to avoid difficult issues with schools. The Council would not support elective home education for children on Child Protection Plans (CPP).

Responding to questions on vacancies, the Sub-Committee heard that work had been done to reinvigorate the recruitment campaign with a specific recruitment officer for the directorate working on advertising campaigns and the use of social media. A round of recruitment of qualified and experienced social workers from Zimbabwe and South Africa had taken place with 17 offers for posts accepted. This number may be increased to 22 and was supported by transformation funding to cover the additional costs of using a bespoke recruitment agency and sponsorship of VISAs. The assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) recruitment campaign had been reviewed which had led to seven newly qualified social workers accepting positions and 13 frontline trainees. Additional recruitment for AYSE social workers would take place in June 2022 through partner colleges and universities. The aim was to have three waves of AYSE recruitment each year, supplemented by additional international and domestic recruitment. Welcome and retention payment offers had also been reviewed and reduced to focus on frontline practitioners in the most challenging roles. The Committee heard that the London Pledge from the London Innovation and

Improvement Alliance helped to set agreed payment rates for locum workers and ensured that permanent staff moving to the agency market could not be employed by another London Borough for six months. The AYSE programme was run by the council and funded by the Department for Education.

Members asked whether any additional international recruitment and heard that other countries were being looked at for recruitment, but there were challenges regarding finding countries where qualifications were transferrable to the UK; the Committee heard that ideally candidates would be Croydon area social workers but that international candidates were excellent and had already reinvigorated the service. The Committee asked about the level of domestic violence re-referrals and Sub-Committee heard that unfortunately there would always be some re-referrals and instances where the service could not intervene early enough. A number of factors impacted these cases such as trauma, mental health issues and substance abuse issues; this required a multi-agency response. The importance of intersectionality when looking at these cases was highlighted, and Members heard that work was being done to increase linkage between the Family Justice Centre and Children's Services. There was a vision for all children to be safe at home, and where this was not possible, in another family home to ensure links to their community were maintained.

The Sub-Committee queried the high levels of re-referrals within 12 months and asked if cases were being closed to quickly. Members heard that officers were scrutinising these cases to ensure the correct decision had been taken. Officers looked at whether thresholds had been correctly applied, the quality of the referrals and responses as well as application of the MASH process. The increased level of domestic abuse formed a part of this picture and often the network around children was not as confident in supporting complex need as officers might have originally thought; this was an area of concern for officers. Members queried whether thresholds were too high and were informed that it was likely more the application and interpretation of information that often led to re-referrals and that there needed to be an effort to slow the process down to enable a better quality of responses. The Corporate Director Children, Young People & Education reassured Members that individual performance issues and indicators were monitored as well as the interrelationship between indicators to give a fuller picture on performance.

Members asked about increased levels of elective home education and asked about the factors contributing to this. Officers responded that in most cases this was the parental choice but there was not currently data to map the reasons for this. It was thought that these increases had occurred nationally during the pandemic, particularly with vulnerable children or children with additional needs. Monitoring capacity for this had been increased in the service and the topic was mentioned in the Schools White Paper.

The Sub-Committee asked what training would be provided to international social workers and were informed that a bespoke six-week programme of training was provided in South Africa followed by an induction programme on

arrival in Croydon. Work had been done with currently employed international social workers to determine what additional induction topics the council could cover, and this had been used to supplement training when these members of staff started. Members heard that the experience of more community based social work from the international social workers was often highlighted as something which could supplement the work of the department's more casework-based approach. There was a specific support programme for international candidates which covered the first year of employment; support was also provided for candidates who brought their families with them.

Members asked how benchmarking would be provided going forward with increased staffing levels and the Sub-Committee were informed that with decreased caseloads, as vacancies reduced, the quality of interventions would increase. Measurements would focus on quality and over time the duration of interventions would reduce; social workers at Croydon were generally at around three years' experience and it was hoped that this would be increased through a three-year programme for AYSE staff and other measures. Horizon scanning was important as was investigation of budget underspends to understand when higher levels of intervention may or may not be needed. The Corporate Director Children, Young People & Education explained that workloads and caseloads were regularly monitored to ensure that the budget was correct, taking into account priorities and demand with an additional focus on retention and upskilling.

The Chair invited former Councillor Jerry Fitzpatrick to address the Sub-Committee regarding exclusions. Mr. Fitzpatrick had led the Task and Finish Group in the previous year on exclusions and summarised the final reports on the themes of secondary managed moves, promoting inclusion in schools, primary to secondary transition, autism and inclusion, in-school seclusion units and elective home education. Mr. Fitzpatrick encouraged Members to play an effective role in scrutinising these issues going forward. The Corporate Director Children, Young People & Education responded that this piece of work had taken place over an extended period and had produced 29 recommendations which would be reviewed by the service and reported to Cabinet in July 2022. The Sub-Committee heard that work on exclusions with schools was ongoing and relationships with schools were good.

The Committee asked about planned changes to Pupil Referral Units and heard that the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Green Paper set out proposals for alternative provisions on SEND education but there were currently no plans for changing this in Croydon. Mr Fitzpatrick stated that the SEND Green Paper recommended for isolation rooms to be moved to more intensive offsite provision shared by several schools after which pupils would return to mainstream schools. Members heard that this would be provided by academy trusts for academies, but the council would be responsible for providing this for community schools although no discussions on this had yet begun. Members heard that local authorities would be responding to the recommendations of the Green Paper, and that talks with school were ongoing; it was explained that alternative provision in the borough was currently very strong and that there was confidence that any

future changes could be positively shaped for the children of Croydon. Members also reminded that all our Secondary Schools were academies.

Members asked about the possibility of children from Ukraine arriving in Croydon in the context of the disproportionate number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) in the borough. The Sub-Committee heard that the position on this was moving and changing with a new announcement expected in June 2022. Croydon had traditionally been a point of entry for asylum seekers due to the Home Office location in the Borough; the positions of the Homes for Ukraine and the families scheme were very different and fell under separate schemes. There were no unaccompanied children from Ukraine in the borough currently and the government was still considering what system should be put in place for children waiting to come to the UK from Ukraine and whether they should come separately from families. If children came unaccompanied as asylum seekers, they would be the responsibility of the local authority and the mandatory national transfer scheme would be used. For the Families for Ukraine scheme, a number of sponsors were in place and these arrangements were separate to those for asylum seekers. Several variables needed to be considered including the vulnerability of children, safeguarding risks and exploitation risks. It was expected that Croydon would receive a disproportionate number of families and children from Ukraine and provisions were already in place for families. The Cabinet Member praised the work done by the directorate regarding Ukrainian families and children.

The Sub-Committee asked about detail in the School's White Paper regarding the potential for the council to run multi-academy trusts. Members heard that initial discussions on whether this would be right for the children of Croydon were being had with schools. This was a long way from becoming legislation and significant discussions and work would be needed before any decisions were taken; the proposals suggested that the Regional Schools Commissioner would have intervention powers.

Members asked how many children with an education, health and care plan (EHCP) were educated outside of the borough and heard that the number of EHCP was increasing but that the number of these educated in borough was improving. This was being done through enhanced learning and specialist provision. The increase in children with EHCP plans educated in borough had been reflected in the internal passenger transport budget strain; focus was on inclusion not exclusion and a recent SEND inspection had commended the work of Croydon and the overall SEND strategy.

On Antenatal and Health Visiting, the Committee requested a broad update and heard that there were significant shortfalls in the number of health visitors, antenatal and postnatal visits. Members and Officers commented that this was an ongoing issue and would be a focus of the work programme for the coming year.

Members questioned the One Council response to serious youth violence and the importance of an integrated response between Children, Adults,

Community Safety and Education directorates was highlighted. The Sub-Committee heard that this could be challenging given the individual responsibilities of the different teams and the multitude of responses at different levels and times. Many factors contributed to youth violence and these included poverty, organised crime and gangs. A strategic board in the council was being developed with partners to cover the 11-25 age groups to cover children after the statutory age of 18 to support with special educational and other needs. The Sub-Committee asked if the serious violence response would focus on localities or take a whole borough approach and were informed that both aspects would be incorporated as well as the London context. Close collaboration with the Gangs and Anti-Social behaviour teams was ongoing as well as work to ensure girls and disproportionality were not lost in the discussions. Members encouraged the inclusion of Community and Youth Centres as part of this response.

The Sub-Committee stated their aspiration to engage in outreach work with children and young people in Croydon; the Cabinet Member endorsed this approach noting its effectiveness and the plan to introduce a similar approach to Corporate Parenting Panel.

The Committee highlighted the following as elements to include in the Work Programme:

- Antenatal and Health Visiting
- Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, including Ukrainian Children and families and the National Transfer Scheme
- Recruitment and Retention – Staff Caseloads, AYSE Caseload Sharing, a breakdown of vacancies and caseloads by teams, London Councils best practise for recruitment and retention.
- Exclusions and Behavioural Isolation Units
- Police representation and Multi-Agency Working
- Mental Health Services
- Outreach work with children and young people in the borough
- Direct youth engagement through Care Homes and Children's Centres
- Engagement with the Gangs Team
- Domestic Abuse

It was agreed that a preliminary list of items for the Work Programme would be circulated by the Clerk to the Sub-Committee with a request for submission of any additional items. These would then be finalised by the Chair and Vice-Chair.

The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Rowenna Davis, addressed the Sub-Committee and praised Members aspirations to engage with young people and asked for impacts to be considered carefully going forward.

31/22 What Difference has this Meeting made to Croydon's Children

The Vice-Chair commented that the Sub-Committee's commitment to hearing the voice of Croydon's children would be of benefit to future meetings and to guiding the ongoing work of Members.

The meeting ended at 8.52 pm

Signed:

Date:

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