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Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee

Meeting of held on Tuesday, 27 June 2023 at 6.30 pm in The Council Chamber, Town Hall, Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

MINUTES

Present: Councillors Councillor Richard Chatterjee (Chair), Councillor Maddie Henson (Vice-Chair), Mike Bonello, Samir Dwesar, Mark Johnson, Eunice O'Dame, Helen Redfern and Catherine Wilson

Co-optee Members

Paul O'Donnell (Voting Parent Governor Representative)

Also

Present: Councillor Maria Gatland (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People)
Councillor Sue Bennett
Councillor Amy Foster (Shadow Cabinet Member for Children and Young People)
Councillor Rowenna Davis (Chair of Scrutiny and Overview)
Councillor Joseph Lee (Deputy Cabinet Member for Children and Young People)

Apologies: Elaine Jones (Voting Diocesan Representative (Catholic Diocese)), Josephine Copeland (Non-voting Teacher representative), Councillors Holly Ramsey and Manju Shahul-Hameed

PART A

30/23 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Elaine Jones (Voting Diocesan Representative (Catholic Diocese)), Josephine Copeland (Non-voting Teacher representative), Councillors Holly Ramsey and Manju Shahul-Hameed.

31/23 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on the 18 April 2023 were approved as an accurate record.

32/23 Disclosures of Interest

In relation to the item concerning Maintained Nursery Schools, Councillor Henson declared that they had attended, and had formerly been a governor at, a Croydon Maintained Nursery School.

33/23 Urgent Business (if any)

There was none.

34/23 Update on the Health Visiting Service

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 15 to 32 of the agenda, which provided an update on the Health Visiting service in Croydon. Chris Terrahe (Deputy Director of Nursing at Croydon Health Services (CHS)) introduced the item and went through the presentation provided in the agenda to the Sub-Committee.

Matthew Kershaw (Chief Executive of CHS and Place Based Lead for Health) explained that the context for Health Visiting was tough nationally, but that it was the job of the service to respond to this challenge. The Sub-Committee heard that the systems and processes of the service were being reviewed, as well as the way that staff were being looked after and the ways in which leadership was working or needed improvement and support. Work was being undertaken with the commissioning team and Public Health, looking at the roles of senior staff, and a new operational manager was now in place; it was hoped that this would provide significant help in the short term. It was acknowledged that whilst some areas of the service were performing better, there were some areas where improvement had not happened. The Director of Public Health highlighted that changes were beginning to happen in the Health Visiting service, and that senior leadership were committed to making improvements. Andrea Cuff (Associate Director of Operations CHS) explained that the workforce would be vital to the improvement journey, and that recruitment and retention were a large element of this as well as the health and wellbeing of staff. Members heard that staff input into the improvement journey was important, and Team Leaders were feeding into all of the workstreams of the improvement plan.

The Chair explained that Members of the Sub-Committee had met with Health Visitors on the 13th June to speak with them about their experiences of working in the service, and that these discussions had helped to inform the lines of questioning for this item. Members noted that the move to 'One Front Door' had been highlighted in the report as an improvement to the service, but had been raised by staff as something that was making aspects of their jobs more difficult. The Chief Executive of CHS and Place Based Lead for Health explained that the service was in the middle of a change programme and that there were advantages and disadvantages to individual elements of this; the change programme needed to be evaluated in its totality, but it was acknowledged that this was difficult as it was still in progress. The Associate Director of Operations CHS added that 'One Front Door' had provided improvements for service users, but agreed that there needed to be a balance between the benefits that improvements provided for service users, the best use of limited resources, and the quality of life for staff.

It was highlighted that when Health Visiting reports were written up post-visit, staff were under the impression that this could be done anywhere except their own homes. The Deputy Director of Nursing at CHS noted that this was not correct, and that processes to look at the possibility of flexible working for Health Visitors was something that was being investigated; it was highlighted that any flexible working would need to be balanced with the health, wellbeing and supervision of staff. The Chief Executive of CHS and Place Based Lead for Health agreed, and highlighted the importance of face-to-face interactions in the delivery of Health Visiting.

Members commented on the positive experience of those who were able to access the service, but noted that staffing levels had got worse since the last update to the Sub-Committee in [November 2022](#); it was asked what was being done to improve this. The Chief Executive of CHS and Place Based Lead for Health responded that this was not the position the service wanted to be in, but explained that the Director of Public Health had been supporting work in developing a new Operational Manager post and changing the way that the Health Visiting team was being led. The national shortage of Health Visitors and the needed improvements in Croydon were acknowledged, and Members heard that the experience of the individual staff member was something that needed to be improved; it was hoped that ultimately this would lead to better recruitment and retention in the service. The Chief Executive of CHS and Place Based Lead for Health stated that they were committed to do everything possible to increase staffing levels.

The Sub-Committee asked what the national vacancy rate was for Health Visitors, and the Deputy Director of Nursing at CHS explained that this was difficult to ascertain, but that the service was looking at if the Croydon offer to staff was competitive with comparable neighbours. Members heard that a recruitment campaign would be launched soon, whilst new ways of working were investigated to move the model of care delivery forward; Croydon had commissioned additional training for staff through Kingston University, as it was felt that the national commissioning of specialist training did not meet Croydon's needs. The Chief Executive of CHS and Place Based Lead for Health committed to working to improve Croydon's position at a pace greater than the national rate, as Croydon had further to travel. It was acknowledged that additional work to think about how this would be measured needed to be undertaken. The Director of Public Health explained that this could be discussed with the Institute of Health Visiting, who were already supporting service improvements, and the development of the offer for staff. Members noted that the national vacancy rates for Health Visitors mirrored those of Croydon.

The Sub-Committee asked what the risk to families was as a result of the vacancies in the service. The Chief Executive of CHS and Place Based Lead for Health explained that the production of risk assessments and the prioritisation of service users was a necessity, and that there was always an effort to direct resource where it was most needed; the operational changes being made to the service always accounted for trying to reduce the risk to families. The Associate Director of Operations CHS explained that those most

in need were seen first wherever possible, and that this approach and triage was supported by the 'One Front Door'. The Deputy Director of Nursing at CHS explained that New Birth Visits were being prioritised, as this gave the service the earliest opportunity to assess any risk, alongside the 6-8 week checks that could identify emergent risks. Members heard that there were non-mandated checks, such as baby weight and feeding clinics, to ensure that there was support where it was needed and to provide multiple opportunities for families to interface with services, but it was acknowledged that risk was growing for some individuals and families for a variety of reasons. Members asked if there was any knock on affect from the vacancies to a greater need of Children's Services, and praised the planned establishment of the complex needs Health Visiting team. The Corporate Director for Children, Young People & Education explained that all services were focussed on the mitigation of risk, but that consequences were always felt where a safeguarding partner was under resourced; Members heard that partners were used to communicating about this and mitigating it where possible, but that not all risk could be nullified. The Sub-Committee asked how many Child Protection Conferences Health Visitors had attended, and heard that Health Visitors had attended 810 conferences in 2022/23.

The Sub-Committee asked whether the current housing crisis was a factor in staff retention and recruitment, and whether any mitigations for this were in place. The Chief Executive of CHS and Place Based Lead for Health explained that some offers of accommodation were provided for new starters from overseas nursing recruitment, and acknowledged that the housing crisis was a factor, alongside the cost of living, that could affect recruitment and retention. Members heard that all that could be done would be, but that resources were not unlimited. Members asked about travel times between visits, and what was being to done to minimise this and increase efficiency in the service. The Deputy Director of Nursing at CHS responded that homeworking was one element of this, but that the roadways naturally provided obstacles that were beyond the control of the service; the introduction of the ULEZ was highlighted as something that could potentially make this more difficult. It was explained that the Health Visiting service was based in six localities to try to reduce geographical distances between the visits of each staff member.

Members asked how the priorities for 2023/24 had been decided, and if specific budget had been assigned to any of them. The Deputy Director of Nursing at CHS explained that these were developed from the aims of the service, feedback, conversations with the commissioning team and the national agenda for Health Visiting. Members heard that the service was fully funded and that all initiatives were carefully costed in collaboration with the commissioning team. These priorities would be monitored through a number of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), for example vacancy rates, which were built into the improvement strategy and could be shared with Members. The Chief Executive of CHS and Place Based Lead for Health added that additional metrics were being considered, for example to monitor if Croydon was improving at a greater rate than the national picture. The Director of Quality, Commissioning & Performance added that monthly meetings took

place between the commissioning team, Health Visiting senior leadership and Public Health colleagues; a more senior summative contract-monitoring meeting took place quarterly, and it was suggested that additional metrics would be discussed at the next one of these and fed back to the Sub-Committee. The Director of Quality, Commissioning & Performance explained that reporting to these meetings had improved and this had led to better reinvestment of budget into the improvement priorities of the service.

Members asked how large the administrative team was in the Health Visiting service, if this helped to drive efficiencies, and if there were any vacancies. The Associate Director of Operations CHS explained that administration was done by a team that oversaw several Public Nursing teams, and that a new performance manager was in post who was helping to drive new ways of working such as the digital offer. There was now a better weekly oversight of performance and improved admin flows, which helped to identify what was affecting performance in the service and to provide better challenge. There had been some long-term vacancies filled by agency workers, but the team was now fully recruited.

Members commented on the targets for one and two year checks, and suggested that these were not ambitious; it was asked what happened to families who were did not receive checks in the target period and whether they were still received a visit. The Deputy Director of Nursing at CHS explained that targets were set by the commissioning team or at a national level, and that all children were offered a check, even if this was outside of target timeframes. If children were 'Universal Plus', 'Universal Partnership Plus', subject to a safety plan or were a looked after child then they would be reviewed and followed up. The Director of Public Health highlighted the importance of timely visits, and the scrutiny the service received from the Children's Safeguarding Board.

The Sub-Committee enquired how the recruitment of additional Band 5 Community Nurses was progressing, and heard that Kingston University was providing the training course for these staff from July 2023. There had been some cultural challenges for existing Health Visitors, but also acknowledgment that this was in the best interest of parents and families to ensure checks could be provided.

Conclusions

The Sub-Committee thanked the Chief Executive of CHS and Place Based Lead for Health, Deputy Director of Nursing at CHS, Associate Director of Operations CHS and Director of Public Health for attending the meeting, and for their open and honest answers to Members questions.

The Sub-Committee welcomed the offer from the Deputy Director of Nursing at CHS to shadow Health Visitors in their natural work setting, to gain insight into the daily experiences of staff.

The Sub-Committee concluded that Health Visiting should remain on the Work Programme for 2023/24, alongside the regular receipt of Quarterly commissioning data.

Members welcomed the commitment and willingness of Senior NHS colleagues to continue to work with and report to the Sub-Committee.

The Sub-Committee concluded that they would continue to monitor the visiting rates of the service throughout the year and would review the targets at a future date against the mean visiting rates for London boroughs in 2022/23 once these were available.

Recommendations

The Sub-Committee were of the view that a working group should be established to look at all possible incentives available to improve retention and recruitment in the Health Visiting service.

The Sub-Committee recommended that all available options to assist staff with housing, where this presented a barrier to recruitment and retention, were investigated.

35/23 Cabinet Report - Maintained Nursery Schools Report

The Sub-Committee considered a paper set out on pages 33 to 34 of the agenda, and in the supplementary agenda, which provided the report due for decision by the Executive Mayor at Cabinet on the 28th June 2023 concerning Maintained Nursery Schools (MNS) in Croydon. The Director of Education introduced and summarised the report, highlighting the national context with other authorities already having taken decisions in this area. Members heard that this report had been brought because of the financial position of MNS over a number of years, and due to a declining birth rate. It was highlighted that the recommendations in the report were to move to a consultation on reducing the provision of MNS, and that no decisions had yet been made. The Director of Education explained that this report was important in setting a strategic direction in relation to MNS, and drew the attention of Members to the recently approved Early Years Strategy; the Sub-Committee heard that the Council understood the great importance of supporting the education of the youngest children in the borough. The Director of Education explained that it was important that parental choice for Early Years provision was still available, and that MNS was just one aspect of this provision.

Members asked why it had not been specified which nurseries were in deficit, and of the ones in deficit, which of these were in this position as a result of remaining open during COVID. The Director of Education explained that they would not be commenting on these kinds of details in order to avoid the appearance of any predetermination before a consultation had taken place; it was confirmed that nurseries had remained open during COVID, but that the deficit had accrued over a longer period that predated this. Members heard

that COVID would have reduced the number of families accessing Early Years provision with some parents and carers working from home. The Sub-Committee highlighted that two of the nurseries were federated, but that this was not acknowledged in the report; the Director of Education explained that this was only an initial report that recommended moving to a consultation, at which point this kind of detail would be looked at in the context of the views of parents, families, partners and young people. It was highlighted that Early Years provision was extremely important, and that MNS was one aspect of this; should the recommendations of the report be accepted by Cabinet, there would be a further report on the results of the consultation that considered all of the views gathered. The Director of Education stated that the consultation was open to hearing any alternative MNS operating models that could deliver provision without further increasing the deficit.

Members raised concerns that, should MNS provision be reduced, that there would be less children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision. The Director of Education explained that should Cabinet decide to move to consultation, then this would be a focus, and that a detailed Equality Impact Assessment would be undertaken that took into account a number of different vulnerabilities. Members heard that it was recognised that there were increased numbers of children coming from Early Years settings with identified and unidentified SEND needs; as a result, the Locality SEND Support programme would be rolled out into Early Years settings so that there was support for families, where these needs were identified, to ensure a smooth transition into schools. The Director of Education highlighted that the consultation on Children's Centres had been wide reaching, responsive and adaptive to feedback, and that this approach would be carried through to any consultation on MNS. The Corporate Director for Children, Young People & Education highlighted that no decisions had yet been made, and that the outcome of any consultation could not be predetermined, but that it would need to provide a solution to the financial situation of MNS in Croydon.

It was asked what proportion of children leaving MNS were registered SEND or awaiting a review; the Director of Education explained that it was not possible to provide this figure, as the community was so mobile, and many children did not go on to attend a school in Croydon. Members heard that the number of Reception children with an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP) could be provided if requested, but it would be difficult to determine how many of these children had attended an MNS in Croydon. It was explained that, as the Locality SEND Support programme was rolled out, that SEND support would be provided in Early Years settings, which would make this kind of data more readily available. The Vice-Chair highlighted the importance of MNS in working with families of children with unidentified SEND needs and their hope that this was reflected in any consultation.

The Sub-Committee asked what the possible positive outcomes for children would be should the proposed option of the consultation come to pass. The Director of Education explained that they could not pre-empt the results of the consultation, but that the focus of the Education department was on providing a positive start to children in education and delivering a comprehensive Early

Years provision to support the choices of parents. Members asked if, given the national context, there was anything MNS could have done to avoid their current situation. The Corporate Director for Children, Young People & Education responded that this was a national challenge, not just for MNS, but for other schools too, and highlighted the work done over a number of years through the Education department and Schools Forum to help these organisations live within their means.

The Chair invited Councillor Foster to ask a question regarding the number of children attending MNS over the last few years predating COVID, the cost of living affecting parent choice, and the possible negative effects that reducing MNS provision might have on the recruitment and retention of professionals in future. The Director of Education explained that Nursery teachers operated in a number of environments other than MNS, and that this was important to ensure that parents and families had choice and could send their children to an environment with a qualified teacher or an Early Years educator. Members heard that COVID had seen a reduction in those accessing Early Years provision due to increased homeworking of families, but that MNS attendance figures were not static and there had been some increases since the end of the pandemic; the figures of those attending MNS in Croydon for the last six years could be provided if requested. The Director of Education confirmed that any consultation would embrace any suggestions of operating models from respondents.

Members asked about falling birth rates, how school place requirements had been calculated, whether the figures were robust, and if there was an accepted level of MNS provision per capita. The Director of Education explained that the annual school capacity survey (SCAP) required the numbers of school places to be set in advance, and this took into account predicted birth rates, mobility and housing growth; figures were set five years in advance, but were different every year due to high mobility in Croydon. Members heard that whilst this was worked out through a formula, school place planning was not a science. The Director for Education explained that the budget 'followed the child', but that this needed to be balanced with capacity to take on additional children where needed. Members asked if having too many school places with not enough children could lead to reduced budget per child and it was confirmed that this could be the case; not all places were filled in MNS but staffing costs remained the same, and a solution was needed that had sufficient provision without increasing the deficits of MNS.

The Sub-Committee asked about actions taken by other boroughs, and how long consultation on reducing MNS had been considered. The Director of Education responded that discussion on this kind of consultation had been considered for a number of years, and that other boroughs had already amalgamated or federated MNS, or had no provision at all. Members noted that Sutton did not have any MNS provision. The Director of Education restated that they could not pre-empt the decision at Cabinet or the results of any consultation.

Members asked if it was possible that primary schools would increase nursery provision should MNS reduce. The Director of Education stated that they could not know if this would happen, but that any consultation would likely generate a lot of discussion, including at the Schools Forum.

The Sub-Committee asked what would be done about the 'historic deficit', and it was explained that, should any MNS be closed, the deficit would move to the Council's General Fund. The Director for Education confirmed that any consultation would start after the school Summer Holidays.

Request for Information

The Sub-Committee requested that the number of those on the MNS nursery school rolls over the last 6 years be provided to inform Members on the demand for MNS places over this period.

Conclusions

The Sub-Committee concluded that, should Cabinet approve the consultation, that the Sub-Committee monitor and engage with the consultation as fully as possible, and that any paper on the consultation results should be included on the Work Programme for 2023/24.

The Sub-Committee were of the view that it should encourage as much engagement as possible with the consultation should it be approved by Cabinet.

36/23 Early Help, Children's Social Care and Education Dashboard

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 35 to 38 of the agenda, which provided the Early Help, Children's Social Care and Education Dashboard.

Members of the Sub-Committee expressed their approval that there were no 'Red' items on the dashboard, and asked whether if OFSTED were to inspect the Council whether officers were confident that a 'Good' or better rating would be achieved. The Corporate Director for Children, Young People & Education responded that they did not want to pre-empt any inspection results, but that preparation for inspections was underway through producing self-assessments. Members heard that considerable work had gone into improving performance, but this was only one aspect that would be considered, and that the significant pressures on services needed to be taken into account. The Sub-Committee asked if the Corporate Director for Children, Young People & Education was confident, and Members heard that she was confident in her team and staff to work to the best of their ability and to rise to the challenges in Croydon.

Members asked how performance was across all of the departmental KPIs, not just the ones contained in the Dashboard. The Director of Quality,

Commissioning & Performance responded that there were 84 indicators across CYPE on their departmental scorecard; in April 2023, 40 were Green, 22 were Red and 22 were Amber.

The Sub-Committee asked about the Amber indicators and heard that there were actions behind all of these indicators with a view to improving these numbers, which were scrutinised in a number of different internal meetings monthly. The narrative for all indicators were written by the relevant Heads of Service, and received regular challenge and updates.

The Sub-Committee asked if in future there could be some explanation of where certain indicators were interdependent on others, and to provide more celebration of where the department was doing well. On CYPE 24, requested more detail on the mitigations being implemented in future versions of the report.

Conclusions

The Sub-Committee welcomed the positive movement in the dashboard, and the absence of red indicators.

The Sub-Committee concluded that for the next meeting an additional appendix would be added to this item, which provided a list of currently 'Red' indicators across the CYPE directorate KPIs to discuss with the relevant directors.

Recommendation

The Sub-Committee recommended that the narrative on future versions of the report looked to identify where indicators were linked or interdependent, to provide Members with a fuller understanding.

37/23 Draft Work Programme 2023/24

The Sub-Committee confirmed their desire to include the Cabinet paper responding to the results of the consultation regarding Maintained Nursery Schools on its Work Programme for 2023/24.

38/23 What Difference has this Meeting made to Croydon's Children

The Chair commented on the work the Sub-Committee were doing to monitor and engage with the Health Visiting service on their improvement journey, and the positive impact that this would hopefully have on the future lives of Croydon's children.

The meeting ended at 9.11 pm

Signed:

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Date:

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