

MINUTES OF MEETING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON THURSDAY 19TH DECEMBER 2019

PRESENT:

Councillors: Erdal Dogan (Chair), Dana Carlin, James Chiriyankandath, Josh Dixon and Tammy Palmer

Co-opted Members: Mark Chapman, Luci Davin and Lourdes Keever

12. FILMING AT MEETINGS

The Chair referred Members present to item 1 on the agenda in respect of filming at this meeting and Members noted the information contained therein.

13. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Davies and Hakata.

14. ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None.

15. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

16. DEPUTATIONS/PETITIONS/PRESENTATIONS/QUESTIONS

None.

17. MINUTES

In respect of item 10 (Educational Attainment and Performance), it was agreed to add to the actions agreed that reference to how Haringey Education Partnership is ensuring that statutory obligations on religious education are fulfilled be included in future reports.

AGREED:

That, subject to the above amendment, the minutes of the meeting of 7 November be approved.

18. CABINET MEMBER QUESTIONS - CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Councillor Zena Brabazon, Cabinet Member for Children and Families, outlined the key developments within her Cabinet portfolio:

- OFSTED had recently undertaken a focussed inspection of children's social care services, including the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). Preliminary feedback that had been provided had been positive;
- Beverly Hendricks had been appointed to the post of Assistant Director for Social Care as part of the consolidation of the Children and Young People's Service management team;
- The Outstanding for All Awards had taken place recently and she had written to congratulate all of those who had been recognised as part of this. There had also been an awards ceremony for looked after children. She stated that she would like to invite Panel Members to attend future events;
- She had recently attended two briefings aimed at school governors. She had some concerns regarding levels of participation and felt that there was work that needed to be done to increase their engagement as their role was very important;
- In respect of the budget, the High Needs funding block was overspent despite the additional £4m in funds that had been allocated by the government;
- The Grove School had opened recently in the building previously occupied by the Professional Development Centre. The Grove was a free school for children with autism of up to the age of 19. The new facilities were very well resourced;
- Take up of free nursery places for two and three year olds was not as good as hoped. This was a London wide issue and a source of concern. There had been a lot of outreach work including door knocking. The reasons for the drop were unclear but it was likely that there were a number of factors, including housing issues;
- She felt that the ability of school staff to cope with the high levels of turnover and wide diversity of children and young people within Haringey schools needed to be recognised and celebrated.

In answer to a question, she stated that work was also required to develop a collective response to falling school rolls, which was a major strategic issue. This would need to involve all relevant stakeholders. Ann Graham, the Director of Children's Services, reported that discussions with schools were taking place and further work on the matter was planned in the New Year. The issue affected schools across the borough. The importance of schools to individual neighbourhoods was acknowledged though.

In answer to a question regarding the "hostile environment" and possible government action to reduce the immigration rights of unaccompanied children from the European Union, the Cabinet Member stated that the Council would lobby against any potential change that would affect them adversely. There was an obligation and a commitment to support children who lived in the borough and attended Haringey schools. Ms Graham reported that legislation would be responded to as and when required. The vision for Children's Services was to do the best for all children in need, in accordance with the Children Act.

In answer to a question regarding the loss of Blue Badge parking spaces that parents of children with a disability were able to use, the Cabinet Member stated that the pressure on families was considerable. The Council therefore should be seeking to make life easier for such families. She requested further information on the instance referred to in the question and agreed to take the matter up with the Council's Environment and Neighbourhoods Service, who were responsible for parking issues.

In respect of the recent OFSTED inspection, Ms Graham reported that limited notice had been given. The outcome of the process was that a letter would be sent to the Director providing detailed feedback. Such visits by OFSTED could trigger a full inspection if specific concerns were identified. However, positive verbal feedback had been given. In particular, it had been considered that children were not unsafe and thresholds were appropriate. Reference was made to strong early help and assessment functions. The service was also found to be caring, with officers prepared to go the extra mile to help families. There were no particular areas that were flagged up as areas of concern. The process had been rigorous and the positive feedback that had been given was therefore very welcome.

In response to a question regarding how schools were being educated in the needs of non-binary children, the Panel noted that the compulsory Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) was being introduced in schools. Linda Edward, Senior Commissioner in the Public Health Service, reported that engagement had taken place with Headteachers and school governors on the introduction of the new programme. This had included training on the process and especially how to engage effectively with parents in the light of the high profile issues regarding RSE that had been raised in Birmingham. It was agreed that Members would be included in future training plans on the issue.

AGREED:

That training for Members be included in the future training plan on the Relationship Education and Relationship and Sex Education processes.

19. SCRUTINY OF THE 2020/21 DRAFT BUDGET / 5 YEAR MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (2020/21-2024/25)

Paul Durrant, Head of Finance, reported that there was a budgetary gap of £5.5 million and the proposals within the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) represented the contribution of services for children and young people to reducing this. The Panel noted the following proposals:

- A new integrated public health commissioned service delivery model for 0-19 year olds that would save £125k in each of the forthcoming two years;
- Reducing placement costs through effective management of the market;
- Insourcing accommodation for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children;
- Reducing operational costs in Schools and Learning and Commissioning; and
- Reviewing spending on transport and taxis.

Panel Members queried the presentation of a budget reduction in the Public Health Service as having a positive impact. Ms Edward reported that health visiting had previously been very targeted, with parents only receiving a small number of visits. However, the service had now been transformed and, in particular, increased its reach against the five health visiting mandated areas. Parents were now receiving a greatly increased number of visits. The proposed savings were to be achieved through merging the health visiting and school nursing services. This would lead to natural efficiencies through less duplication and back office savings. The Panel noted that public health grant funding was ring fenced and the savings achieved would need to be deployed elsewhere within Public Health.

Ms Edward reported that the provider for health visiting was Whittington Health. 92% of parents were currently receiving a new birth visit between 10 and 14 days of the birth. 78% of parents were receiving a 6 to 8 week visit. Although this represented an improvement, further progress still needed to be made.

John O'Keefe, Interim Capital Accountant, reported that the proposal relating to School Streets was currently included within those for children's services but was to be moved to those within the "Place" priority. The main capital investment that was planned was in respect of schools estate maintenance. A number of surveys of the schools estate had taken place during the last 18 months and these had revealed its condition. An additional amount of £10 million per year for five years had been put into the capital budget to fund the work that was required. It was noted that the government only provided a grant of £3m per annum. However, the amounts that had been allocated were still not enough to cover all of the work that was required. The Council was currently developing an asset management plan which will assist in the setting of priorities. It was agreed that a report be submitted to a future meeting of the Panel on the challenges that schools estates were facing.

The Panel noted that the additional funding would cover all of the Children's Services estate and not just schools. It was accepted that the amount that had been allocated was indicative but the need for investment needed to be balanced against the pressure on the Council's revenue budget, which was under pressure and would be affected by additional borrowing costs. The Asset Management Plan and the Capital Strategy would contain additional detail on the proposals including scheduling and priorities. In respect of deliverability, current performance showed an improvement so that was an increased level of confidence.

Ms Graham commented that a lot of preparatory work had been undertaken in the past year on the schools estate due to its maintenance being given a higher priority. Specific criteria was being used to prioritise work that was based on the degree of urgency. In addition, consideration was also given to the priorities of individual schools. Further detail could be provided in a report to a future meeting.

The Cabinet Member stated that there was a massive need for repairs in schools and as much as possible had been allocated for this work. However, there were longer term issues that needed to be considered, such as the future school population. The Panel noted that there would be a regular cycle of reports to inform and guide the work that was undertaken, including the pupil place planning reports. The environmental impact of work would be considered as part of the process.

AGREED:

That a report be submitted to a future meeting of the Panel regarding school estates and action being taken to address maintenance issues.

20. SUPPORT TO CHILDREN FROM REFUGEE FAMILIES - UPDATE ON IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS OF SCRUTINY REVIEW.

Beverley Hendricks, Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care stated that the report covered progress with the implementation of the recommendations of the Scrutiny Review on Support to Children from Refugee Families and, in addition, provided additional information on the context within which the Council was currently working. Appendix 1 of the report indicated whether the recommendations had been either agreed or partially agreed.

There were only two recommendations where further work was still required. One of these related to the implementation of the recommendations a practice audit that was undertaken of the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) team where a progress report to the Panel was requested. This could be placed on the work plan as an item for a future meeting of the Panel. The other outstanding issue related to a report on the provision of good quality immigration advice to families with NRPF. She reported that there was currently much work being undertaken within the service. Examples included the settlement status of unaccompanied children from the EU. Consideration also needed to be given to the citizenship of looked after children and care leavers. The Council was a member of NRPF Connect, which provided local authorities access to a database with a wide range of information, including details on immigration status. It also provided access to relevant teams within the Home Office and this provided the opportunity for the Council to encourage them to regularise the immigration status of relevant families.

In answer to a question, Ms Hendricks stated that she could confirm that there was currently no officer from the Home Office embedded within the NRPF Team. She reported that the Department for Education had recently written to the local authorities asking if reassurance could be given that looked after children were being supported to secure citizenship. A briefing could be submitted to a future meeting of the Panel regarding this if members deemed this useful.

Panel Members felt that resolving the immigration status of families needed to be given a high priority and that referral for good quality immigration advice was essential for this. Ms Hendricks reported that the Council worked closely with the Coram centre, who could assist with legal advice. She stated that NRPF Connect produced quarterly statistical reports and she was happy to report in detail on the findings of these. Amongst other matters, they showed the importance of the granting of leave to remain in ending the need for local authority involvement in cases.

The Cabinet Member reported that the High Court had just ruled that the £1012 fee charged for citizenship was unlawful. Whilst this was good news, the decision was likely to be appealed.

In answer to a question regarding Border Security Force raids, Ms Hendricks reported that there was an obligation on the part of the Police to inform children's social care services when a raid likely to impact on children was planned so that its impact could be mitigated.

In answer to another question, she stated that there was currently no local intelligence on any children returning to the borough from Syria. However, she reported that London Councils and boroughs in close proximity to access points had undertaken some work on this issue and a paper could be submitted to a future meeting on this for information.

She reported that it was proposed that the rates that were set for subsistence for families with NRPF use the NASS rates, which was a national benchmark that was used by other local authorities.

AGREED:

1. That an update on progress with implementing improvements identified as required by the practice audit undertaken on the work of the NRPF team in 2017 be submitted to a future Panel meeting; and
2. That a report be made to a future meeting of the Panel on how families with NRPF are assisted in accessing good quality immigration advice so that they are better able to resolve their status quickly.

21. WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

AGREED:

That the work plan be noted.

CHAIR: Councillor Erdal Dogan

Signed by Chair

Date