

## Education & Children's Services Scrutiny Sub-Committee

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Education & Children's Services Scrutiny Sub-Committee held on Wednesday 15 October 2014 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G01C - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

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**PRESENT:** Councillor Jasmine Ali (Chair)  
Councillor Lisa Rajan  
Councillor Evelyn Akoto  
Councillor James Okosun  
Councillor Kath Whittam  
Councillor Kieron Williams  
Lynette Murphy-O'Dwyer  
George Ogbonna

### OTHER MEMBERS

#### PRESENT:

**OFFICER SUPPORT:** Alasdair Smith, Head of Service, Permanence  
Rory Patterson, Director, Children's Social Care.  
Pauline Armour, Head of Service, Early Help (interim)  
Kerry Crichlow, Director Strategy & Commissioning  
Michael O'Connor Southwark Safeguarding Children Board's Independent Chair  
Julie Timbrell, Scrutiny project manager

### 1. APOLOGIES

- 1.1 There were apologies for absence from Councillor Anne Kirby; Councillor Charlie Smith attended as reserve. The chair welcomed John Martin as the new head-teacher executive representative.

## **2. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT**

2.1 There were no urgent items of business.

## **3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS**

3.1 There were no disclosures of interests or dispensations.

## **4. MINUTES**

### **RESOLVED:**

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 September 2014 were agreed as an correct record.

## **5. REVIEW: CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION**

5.1 The chair welcomed Rory Patterson, Director of Children's Social Care and Southwark Safeguarding Children Board's Independent Chair, Mr Michael O'Connor, and invited them to present.

5.2 The Independent Chair emphasised the importance of partnerships and a multi - agency approach. He spoke about importance of frontline workers engaging with children and building a relationship, as children will not usually come forward to report Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). The social workers role is very important but people in the front line are also vital as will have day to day contact with young people.

5.3 Members thanked the presenters and commented that they had read the papers and background links including the 'See me, hear me' framework and the 'If only someone had listened: Office of the Children's Commissioner Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups'. A member commented that they would like to see the 'See me, hear me' principles more clearly reflected in the framework and commented that it would good to know if the 98 children at risk of CSE had been spoken to. He emphasised the importance of seeing the actual views of young people in the strategy. The Independent Chair commented that CSE had been discussed with the shadow board and they had raised challenging issues such as some young women like hanging out with older men with cars.

5.4 Officers were asked if there were any plans to get outside evaluation using the 'See me, hear me' framework and noted there is a call out offering this. The Independent Chair said that there is a London-wide working together on this as young people move across boundaries and a London-wide safeguarding board. The Director added that that Social Services do routinely get external feedback.

5.5 Members asked about work to engage partners and the Independent Chair said that there is very much a council wide responsibility for identifying and tackling CSE. The Director explained that there has been work to stop a place getting a

licence and there is more work planned with head-teachers. The head-teacher representative welcomed this and said that there needs to be a shared strategy for both preventing and tackling CSE in schools. He noted the strategy mentions PHSE education and asked the Director how this is being taken forward. Director said the intention is to reach out to education colleagues - in the past Safeguarding have been successful in doing training to prevent violence against women. He assured the head-teacher that Safeguarding do want help and advice from schools.

- 5.6 The head-teacher representative commented that social work teams are being rearranged. He raised concerns about information sharing to and from social workers and schools, whether for a child in need or child protection and emphasized it is critical that there is engagement with schools and said that in the past schools have raised concerns about schools not knowing that children are involved with social services. He asked if the move to clusters meant that there would be more risk of this happening during the re-organisation. The Independent Chair said this was intended to be seamless. Members asked about the gap in communication and the Director responded that basing social workers in localities is aimed at improving communication as people will have relationships in smaller clusters – the re-modelling is about improving communications routes.
- 5.7 Members asked about engagement with families and the Independent Chair agreed that this will be important and the CSE strategy will only work if the wider community is engaged. Members spoke about the importance of a cultural shift and a member commented that when she once worked in a mother and baby unit in Brixton and it was common place for older men to be hanging around very young women. She asked if there would be a campaign to raise awareness similar to past safeguarding campaigns. The Independent Chair explained that there is a community engagement group to raise awareness, but it has to be targeted correctly and give the right message as we do not want to encourage people to see it everywhere and also overwhelm services with referrals.
- 5.8 A member said that she was really concerned that Looked After children are so at risk and asked if there is further work being done with these children. The Director said there is further work with children in Kent as there have been issues arising there. He assured members that the work to safeguard Looked After children is an ongoing and dynamic.
- 5.9 Another member commented that the evidence showed that the people who actually raised concerns were either families or social workers with close relationships, and raised concerns about social work turnover. The Director acknowledged that there has been some recent turnover during the Social Care re-structure. He said the service is emphasising working with people and skilling up social workers.
- 5.10 Officers were asked about sharing information on perpetrators and targets and if there was a national database. Officers said there was not but our MASH shares information locally and social care have been asked to share best practice on this. The Independent Chair said the only national programme is where a child has passed a safeguarding threshold and there is also a perpetrator database.

- 5.11 Members commented that numbers in report are not very clear. The Director agreed and explained that safeguarding picked up 98 children who we thought might be at risk of CSE but only about 2 or 3 were actually seriously being abused.
- 5.12 A member said that she was concerned that the intervention and therapeutic support was adequate. Members noted that the social work vacancy rate is important and asked what Southwark's is. The Director said it is 10%, which is much improved as formally it was 45%. He explained vacant posts are covered by agency social workers. Members asked about continuity and retention and the Director said Southwark Council do have a good offer, however it is challenging as a child protection carries risk - some people choose to move around for the better pay in hand and the flexibility to move.
- 5.13 Officers were asked what work had been done with faith groups on CSE and officers responded that nothing specifically on CSE but there has been outreach on safeguarding issues and they will talk to community engagement about further work on CSE. Members suggested liaising with Councillor Jamille Mohammed, Deputy Cabinet Member for Inter-Faith Community Relations to champion this work.
- 5.14 A member said he was concerned that outdated concerns about confidentiality could stop young people getting help and asked if a GP is bound by confidentiality if there is a disclosure. The Independent Chair that there is a requirement to make a call to social services if abuse is disclosed, however people interpret abuse differently and this can affect decision making.

## **RESOLVED**

Following the meeting the scrutiny chair will consult with the committee on drawing up a list of recommendations for Cabinet and the Safeguarding Children Board.

## **6. EARLY HELP**

- 6.1 Pauline Armour, Head of Service, Early Help (interim) and Kerry Crichlow, Director Strategy & Commissioning, presented the paper on Early Help. The chair then invited questions.
- 6.2 A member asked for comment on 'transitions', as nationally these are recognised as problematic times and when things can go wrong. The Head of Early Help responded that there has been a focus on the transition from Early Years to primary school. Officers have been contacting Early Years practitioners and encouraging them to flag up any issues with schools, even if they do not reach a threshold, such as safeguarding, but are just issues and concerns. This has been much more effective. Primary school transition to secondary schools is much more challenging as there are 100s of children going to schools throughout London. The service is particularly looking at young people with mental health issues or social problems, where the needs are not so obvious.

- 6.3 The Director was asked about cases where a young person in need and has many agencies involved and officers explained that there is usually a lead person, and there also might be a 'team around a child'.
- 6.4 Officers were then asked about the 'step down' process. The Head of Early Help said that the council is doing work on this. If a social worker wants to do a step down then this would be discussed with the duty social worker and then this would be followed by a team around the child meeting. This would be recorded, and the outcomes and progress monitored. A member asked if schools would be involved and the officer responded that they would; schools are a first port of call.
- 6.5 A member asked for an explanation on the resources involved and total spend The officer responded that universal services would be easier to cost and social care know prevention is can save significant sums - for example preventing a child going into the care can save a quarter a million pounds a year . This is exactly the right challenge to invest in prevention, though this is challenging now with less money. Officers explained there is funding to set up pupil development units which are still going and this programme helped the move to zero exclusions at primary schools. It is harder with secondary schools – the council have welfare officers but some academy chains have there own welfare services that the council are seeking to engage more with.
- 6.6 Officers were asked for more information about primary school exclusions and they explained that there have been no exclusions at primary schools for 6 years, but they were never that high and ranged between about 6, 8 and 12 a year. The council is now working with schools to reduce fixed term exclusions, but that is not always easy.
- 6.7 The head-teacher representative commented that it cost a secondary school around £20,000 to purchase 'traded' services. Officers were asked what their response would be if a young person comes through from a non-trading school and they explained that they are very reluctant to turn a child away and they usually look for siblings, for example, and then Early Help will do family support work. Officers reported that the council is engaging more with schools .The Harris Academy dose not trade, nor does Charter - but we do have a close relationship. Trading is variable, Kingsdale and the Globe are doing more with the council and we are very pleased with that.

## **7. MINI REVIEW: ADOPTION**

- 7.1 Rory Patterson, Director of Children's Social Care, and Alasdair Smith, Head of Service – Permanence, briefly presented. The Director indicated a power point presentation had been prepared, but this had not been circulated (this is attached to the minutes).
- 7.2 A member asked what the target period set by central government for perspective adaptors progressing through to approval is, and how long this takes in Southwark. Officers explained the target is 6 months, end to end, and

Southwark's average was 2 years, however of the new cohort half did under 6 months. People can also start and stop, and the clock does too, and some people also come and go. Members asked what the issues are and officers responded that bereavement and accommodation are common reasons for people pausing.

- 7.3 Members asked if there is under representation of ethnic groups amongst adopters and officers said is a BME shortage. The government emphasised that trans-racial adoption should not be a barrier - however most white adopters want white children and likewise black adopters. The Director said the council have been very successful in their outreach to faith groups and churches. The council are also doing a leaflet drop particularly targeting certain communities. A member commented that whenever she sees a banner near her home she thinks of adoption.
- 7.4 A member commented that the average time taken between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family in the paper supplied have gives no context, and an improvement of 60 days may not be that significant for a 14 year old but it would be for a child under 2 years . The Director explained that formally the council were not allowed to do parallel planning but now social service can do this, this means that alternative arrangement can be considered before proceeding have culminated. The council is now at 20 odd weeks, whereas we were formally at 50 weeks. Some young people get permanence from foster care and this is a route that that we now have more latitude to promote. Numbers of adoptions are going up but time is still an issue. Members requested more information particularly for under twos and disabled children.
- 7.5 A member commented that she is an adoptive parent and she decided to take a bit of a gamble with fostering for permanence, which paid of off. She went on to ask why the council is not an example on trans-racial adoptions and asked if the council could reach out to more people to foster and adopt. Another member remarked that she had been considering adopting for a long term but there is fear of the first step. The Director responded that there are gorgeous kids but perspective adopters do have concerns and social workers do need to explain about potential family dynamics, mental health problems, and foetal alcohol syndrome. The Director said it is crucial there is long term support for adopters and long term guardianship. The council organise drop in sessions and meeting in cafes to enable perspective adopters to find out more and take the first step. The Director went on to comment that a Google of Southwark will show that the council has been a pioneer with same sex adopters and supported trans-racial adoptions, for example one women has adopted a black child with hearing difficulties and she has also taken older children . A member commented that London has a complex make up of ethnicities and therefore exact matches are not always possible or desirable.
- 7.6 The Director said he was chairing a group looking at fostering for adoption. There is a legal structure now to support this, whereas formally there was not. The group is exploring this issue, particularly given all the evidence that the earlier children are placed in a permanent family the better.
- 7.7 The chair commented that as an adopter she had met the minister leading on adoption and had been impressed. She went on to ask the officers if it would be

possible to facilitate a focus group with randomly selected adopters and potential adopters to support the review. Officers assured her it was and this could be done in a couple of weeks.

7.8 The Director was asked about some of the difficulties in realising successful adoptions and he mentioned the lack of BME adopters, older children, children with complex needs and sibling groups. A member asked if there was a ceiling age for adopters and he responded that there is none legally and this would be explored – the oldest is nearly 60 and there is a very young couple who wanted a child.

7.9 The chair thanked the officers for the session and offered to help out if needed in promoting adoption and commented that her feedback as an adopter had been that contact with families had been her strong point.

## **RESOLVED**

A focus group will be organised.

Officers will be asked to provide more context on adoption timescales and numbers for children, particularly:

- Under 2s
- by ethnicity
- with special needs / disability

## **8. FREE HEALTHY SCHOOL MEAL - UPDATE REPORT**

The report was noted.

## **9. WORK-PLAN**

9.1 The chair reported that a meeting was held with the head-teachers executive which went well. The head-teacher representative agreed there was a good discussion and that the meeting had explored the good practice on improving achievement, which is slightly different than attainment as it included progress. He emphasized the importance of family policy in closing the achievement gap and reported that when pupil premium is used well and progress improves. He drew the committee's attention to the upcoming head-teachers conference and the work of Professor Steve Strand, who will be speaking there. The project manager reported that it was agreed that she and the chair would attend the event to promote and discuss the review.