



Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission held on Thursday 14 March 2024 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Chloe Tomlinson (Chair)
Councillor Jason Ochere
Councillor Joseph Vambe
Councillor John Batteson
Councillor Renata Hamvas
Councillor Irina Von Wiese
Jonathan Clay (Co- opted member)
Marcin Jagodzinski (Co- opted member)

**OTHER
MEMBERS
PRESENT:**

**OFFICER
SUPPORT:** Amit Alva, Scrutiny Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Rachel Bentley (Vice-Chair).

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

There were no items of business which the Chair deemed urgent.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS.

There were no disclosures of interests and dispensations.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 February 2024 were approved as a correct record.

5. SOUTHWARK SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP (SSCP)

The commission first heard from Alasdair Smith, Director of Children & Families, Children's and Adults' Services on the following points.

- 3 Statutory partners- Council, Health & Police; Update to statutory guidance on working with children- Partnership required to have fourth partner as education
- Instead of independent Chair, rotating Chairing by partners; Current Chair Vanessa Briton (Police); Aim to keep children safe from harm and abuse, wider stakeholder meeting with schools and hospitals
- Multi agency safeguarding hub owned by the council but referrals from all partners including police, most significant referral is child abuse, child neglect is also growing as a factor.
- Families need to get help early, parents are under immense pressures at times. Early help system- children and family centres; higher number of case referrals in Black British, underlying causes of higher deprivation, service looking at tackling the root causes. (Peckham and Newington)
- During Covid over 400 child protection plans in Southwark compared 265 cases currently; Private fostering work after Ofsted review- more awareness and learning messaging, challenges in recruiting social working staff, 9 vacancies for council and agency staff
- Southwark working with London Innovation and Improvement Alliance to improve conditions within the social worker market, where-in agencies exploit vacancies in competing boroughs by increasing hourly-charges.
- Strategy for child neglect needed and being developed, especially due to Covid and Cost-of-Living crisis and the immense pressure on families; working with families to put in place appropriate child protection measures; understanding parents and pressure, exploring core issues.
- Care- leavers are given support by personal advisers who are not social workers, as ages 18 and above don't receive the support given by Children's Safeguarding Legislation, although care-leavers are still quite vulnerable. Most care leavers feel safe at their existing housing, however some concerns on the quality of housing.
- Sub-groups in partnerships- Equality and Effectiveness- looking at the

different pathways to tackle Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), National review of children with disabilities not in care.

- Disproportionality in child protection services and discrimination and need for more work in child neglect.
- Child safeguarding practice review- experienced leaders in sub-groups, looking at national safeguarding issues such as adolescent peer to peer violence cases.
- Local learning review are reviewed nationally and resulting actions are implemented; Issues of mother's mental health affecting child welfare, Trans children struggling with sexuality and gender identity issues; review good practices to support young trans children. Supporting practitioners to help trans children and parents
- Multi agency child exploitation panel- includes social care, health and police agencies; Working together initiative- new statutory guidance- incorporating education as a partner; Council approach to combine Children and Adult Safeguarding partnership under Alasdair; Small grant from government for this initiative used in schools for education.

The commission then asked questions on the following themes

- Council role working with the police on young people in custody, BAME young people affected more.
- Baroness Casey Review findings of racism in the MET police and their involvement in safe guarding.
- Reduction in child protection plans post Covid in Southwark compared to other borough; Impact of the reduction in child protection plans on the child in need plans; Case workloads monitoring for Social workers given the high number of vacancies.

Alasdair explained to the commission that there are 3 groups of children in custody: Children in custody overnight who are arrested, children remanded in custody for longer periods and children in custody serving prison sentences. Furthermore youth justice service produces a monthly report which is reviewed by multi agency groups questioning the need for less serious offences to be relocated to alternative accommodations, however some of them have serious offences and are kept in police custody. In Southwark there is one children's centre and the council are opening another one, however placing a child in children's centre is a police decision. Youth Justice Management is reviewed annually, youth remanded in custody during Covid have been remanded longer and it's unfair to the young person. Statutory requirements dictate that remanded children are looked after by the council.

In addition, 6-7 years ago care-leavers report indicated that care – leavers end up in prison at age 18 and above and mainly between 25-30 ages. The council have since developed good practice guides in supporting care- leavers. Some work has been done in engaging with children serving custodial sentences, because they have not been part of the care system before and do not get the money for expenses, which often leads to criminal acts. The council now provides some monetary allowance for children with custodial sentences. Prisons like Cookham Wood for young offenders does not meet the desired standards for young offenders' institutions.

Alasdair informed the commission that involvement of the police in safeguarding is critical to the success of the partnership. Child protection plans rose during Covid, decisions of child protection plans are based on judgements and on the neglect and poverty areas within the strategy. Southwark child protection plans which used to be approximately 300 plans few years ago and been down to under 200 plans earlier this year, however this month it's at 265 plans. A lot of work is being done through the early intervention and help for children and families to reduce this number. Parental peer advocacy is an initiative by the council to connect with parents to get a holistic overview of the family situation, rather than a box ticking exercise which may or may not meet thresholds for a Child protection plan.

The commission heard from Alasdair that social worker caseloads data can be provided to the commission at a later date, families are first offered early help or family help to try and mitigate circumstances .The most time consuming aspect of social work is the bureaucratic process of courts and child protection plans, the council is endeavouring to ensure that only children who absolutely need a protection plan are in that category. The council has been using funds from innovation fund for social work costs, in addition the council has setup separate assessment teams to help lighten the workload of social workers. Social worker caseloads can be high and there is some pressure on the social workers, the council is closely monitoring workloads to try and mitigate the pressure by hiring 25 case workers internationally.

The commission then asked further questions on the following themes

- Role of partnership in reducing the number of young women at risk from FGM; Clarification of data calculation metrics in child protection; recruiting locally from community for social work; support for young people dealing with gender identity cases
- Areas of focus for the Southwark Safeguarding Children Partnership; refugee families in safeguarding; pathways through which families come under child protection
- Education and training for parents post child birth to reception on managing stress in parenting; Early family help and intervention

Alasdair explained to the commission that there is a separate working group for FGM which involves health and safety and schools, specifically on attendance. The

council is working continually to spread awareness among the public and caseworkers to have wider outlook on cases when dealing with child protection. The council has a response training for social workers tied into the Working Together and Care-leavers service. The council currently has 4 social apprenticeships providing education and training to help grow the local pool of social workers.

The commission learnt from Alasdair that providing the work force for social work and a fairer system that focuses especially on disadvantaged families are key areas for the partnership. Furthermore, more work is needed around the adolescents and teenagers who are more at risk due to external factors outside the family environment, which the current legislation and framework for child protection does not account for. In Southwark refugee families do not show in child protection and/or child in need systems, however there are some cases of low level child protection in the Latin or Eastern European communities plainly due to lack of understanding by such families of UK's child protection framework and legislation. Pathways to child protection is assessed on both areas of child behaviour and harm to the child, a holistic approach is used to assess family circumstances.

Alasdair informed the commission that Southwark has 4 children and family centres that are run through 16 sites that provide help parents need, care quality commission has approved these centres as they are providing culturally diverse support to families from all communities. Early family intervention and help is a needs based assessment, ranging from parenting programmes in family centres to child protection services.

6. DRAFT SCRUTINY REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS 2023-2024

Education Recommendations

The commission clarified the process of receiving responses back from the Cabinet on recommendations in eight weeks and that the scrutiny team endeavours to actively track recommendations from the previous years.

On recommendation 6 (Kintore Way), the commission discussed the need for the recommendation to cover more LA maintained nurseries and not just Kintore Way (KW) nursery. However the commission also agreed that the rationale for KW to be mentioned in the nursery is due to the large proportion of nursery pupils and provisions at KW. The commission then agreed to include KW 'but not limited' to in the recommendation.

On recommendation 7, the commission discussed the need to revise the time frame in the recommendation of May 2024.

On recommendation 4, the commission discussed the need to include thorough communication of process with schools with regards to tracking pupil numbers; and further communication with schools when decisions are being taken on closures

and amalgamations as a part of the Keeping Education Strong Strategy.

Local Economy Recommendations

On recommendation 5, the commission discussed the need to review the recommendation noting that Southwark Works relies on partner organisations to provide entry level jobs and the council's limited role in it.

On recommendation 3, the commission agreed to review and rephrase the wording around the timing of the internships and provide more context in the body of the report.

7. WORK PROGRAMME 2023-2024

The commission noted the work programme for the year 2023-2024.

Meeting ended at 9:38 pm.

CHAIR:

DATED: