



CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee held on Monday November 9 2009 at 7.00 pm at Town Hall, Peckham Road, London SE5 8UB

PRESENT: Councillor Barrie Hargrove (Chair)
Councillor Eliza Mann
Councillor Jonathan Mitchell
Councillor Sandra Rhule
Councillor Veronica Ward
Reverend Nicholas Elder
Colin Elliott
Jane Hole

**OFFICER
SUPPORT:** Pauline Armour, Assistant Director of Access & Inclusion,
Children's Services
Pauline Easty, Senior Lawyer, Social Services
Rachael Knight, Scrutiny Project Manager

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Vineall; apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Mann.

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

There were none.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

Members made the following declarations: Cllr Ward as a governor at Dulwich Wood Children's Centre; Cllr Mitchell as a governor at Harris Girls' Academy; Cllr Rhule as parent of a pupil at Kingsdale Foundation School; Reverend Elder as the chair of governors at Kinderella Pre-School; Jane Hole as an employee of Harris Academy at Peckham and governor at the City of London Academy; and Colin Elliott as a parent governor at St Saviours and St Olave's.

4. MINUTES

[This item was deferred to the end of the meeting.]

- 4.1 Reverend Elder reminded the scrutiny officer that he had given his apologies for this meeting. The minutes of the Children's Services and Education scrutiny sub-committee meeting held on October 5 2009 were otherwise agreed as a correct record.

5. REPORT ON VALIDATED SCHOOL RESULTS

- 5.1 Pauline Armour, Assistant Director of Access and Inclusion, Children's Services, led members through the report on pupils' performance results in Southwark schools for 2009, and highlighted the most significant outcomes. Key points raised included as follows:
 - 5.2 Southwark's school results over the last four years have consistently improved, and the borough's ranking on the school results league table has shifted - from approximately fourth to lowest nationally to within the second top quartile. This is a great credit to the schools and to the council's Children's Services colleagues.
 - 5.3 There are still concerns regarding Key Stage 1 results (KS1), as many children are starting school with very low educational standards and are not performing well in KS1 tests. Some groups of children in this stage are performing considerably better than others, and it is believed that poverty significantly affects children's performance. This is particularly the case with boys from African-Caribbean backgrounds.
 - 5.4 The council recently commissioned a piece of research across 32 primary schools, which is designed to unlock the key factors that limit or detrimentally affect children's performance at this stage, and to consider how parental involvement could be increased to help improve performance.
 - 5.5 Children from West African backgrounds tend mainly to attend faith schools and tend to be fairly high achieving. There are also schools with high numbers of pupils from white working class backgrounds that have achieved very high results. As this bucks the borough trend that schools with such demographics have comparatively low performance results, the council is now in a position to challenge Headteachers and school governing bodies by pointing to the data of good performing schools in poorer areas,

and by trying to analyse how these schools have done so well.

- 5.6 There are currently no secondary schools in the borough causing significant concern for the council. The authority is concerned, however, about several primary schools, one of which has gone into 'special measures'.
- 5.7 Academies are not required to provide their performance results. However, when they opt not to the results can eventually be obtained from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).
- 5.8 The chair asked whether the schools in poorer areas that are performing well have high percentages of children from West African or South American backgrounds. The Assistant Director responded that she thinks this could be a strong factor and remarked that the faith schools - where many West African children are enrolled - tend to have immaculate attendance and punctuality.
- 5.9 A member commented that she had hoped to see the performance data broken down according to gender, to be able to see the difference in results between girls and boys, as the discrepancy in gender results at some schools signals that there are other key factors affecting performance in addition to poverty. She emphasised that more good practice needs to be identified for helping black boys effectively and sought assurance that schools where boys are not doing well are supported.
- 5.10 Members also queried why the KS1 results are comparatively lower. The Assistant Director commented that she believes that some children start school when they are too young; that more outside readers are needed to come in to the schools to read with children; and that perhaps generally there is merit in the Scandinavian model in which children start school when they are older. She further explained that some Headteachers have noticed children transferring from nurseries who have very limited language, numeracy and literacy skills. She added that officers think more could be done to help the transition of children from Early Years to reception classes.
- 5.11 Regarding gender difference, the Assistant Director remarked that this seems difficult to understand, but observed that girls tend to play different games and traditionally learn to read earlier than boys; and that it is rare for primary aged girls to have behavioural problems, in contrast to boys.
- 5.12 Members asked whether schools with their own nurseries tend to manage the transition from Early Years to reception more effectively. The Assistant Director replied that this does not seem to be a pattern.

- 5.13 Members also queried whether children coming from “poor” backgrounds means financially poor. The Assistant Director commented that this is a complex factor, but that ‘poor’ is used to refer primarily to children who receive free school meals. She explained, however, that there are many families eligible for free schools meals who do not claim them on account of the documentation needed, which could reveal, for example, that someone in the family is in the country illegally. She said that it is not known whether proportionately more children claiming free school meals are from African Caribbean backgrounds, but when a pupil is an African Caribbean boy receiving free school meals, this combination of factors tends to correlate with poor performance.
- 5.14 Members also raised the significance of male role models and whether boys who perform poorly academically engage positively with other activities such as sport. The Assistant Director responded that she thinks male role models are significant where a child’s father is absent and reported that although primary school teaching staff is predominantly female, many schools employ male learning mentors or teaching assistants who are deliberately directed to work with boys. She added that some boys do tend to behave differently regarding sports, but there is also a tendency for boys who are doing well academically to also do well at sports.
- 5.15 A member emphasised that despite the various factors of a child’s background, some schools are making a better intervention than others. The Assistant Director agreed with the importance of this point, and added that it highlights how some good schools are making a difference despite being based in a poorer neighbourhood, and that this fits with the authority’s view that all children in Southwark can aspire to the highest level.

6. EARLY YEARS REVIEW - CONTINUED

- 6.1 The chair explained that he was yet to hear from Mike Smith, Assistant Director of Community Services, regarding suggestions of Early Years (EY) settings for members to visit and that an alternative may be for scrutiny officers to contact providers. Members discussed their preferred timing for the visits and agreed that they should take place where possible before Christmas. It was also confirmed that members would not require CRB checks.
- 6.2 The chair invited suggestions on how to use the January meeting for this topic and how to shape the way forward for this review.
- 6.3 Pauline Armour offered to speak with Mike Smith for suggestions of providers to contact, with the view that visits be arranged for four different EY settings.

- 6.4 A member commented that there seem to be two key aspects to this review: one being the introduction of the single funding formula, which has had a high profile on national news; and the second is the general evolving picture of provision in Southwark and the sufficiency of access to that provision.
- 6.5 It was explained that drop-in sessions take place for parents of Early Years children at Sunshine House on Peckham Rd and at the Walworth One Stop Shop. Arrangements were being made with the relevant officers to see whether this could provide an opportunity for members to attend at the close or start of the sessions, in order to speak with parents.
- 6.6 Members approved draft 'starter' questions intended as a baseline for speaking with EY providers and parents. Information was also requested on the proportion of children accessing statutory provision - namely those in maintained settings and those in the care of the various PVI providers.
- 6.7 A member observed that there are sometimes concerns about the adequacy of access to Early Years settings for families moving into or across the borough. Queries were raised about how children's centres try to ensure access in such cases. The chair commented that this type of issue relates to the sub-committee's interest in the take-up of EY places, and fits with the concern that provision is mopped up by families 'in-the-know'.

RESOLVED:

1. That members undertake a site visit to Early Years providers before Christmas, with the view that visits be made to one each of the following EY settings:
 - a children's centre;
 - a childminder (It was noted that there may be the opportunity to meet with several childminders during the visit to a children's centre.);
 - a maintained nursery;
 - a private or voluntary nursery.
2. That note-taking be provided by scrutiny officer support.
3. That the timeframe for the review be as follows:
 - March 2: CSE scrutiny sub-committee to consider a draft report
 - March 8: amended report to be submitted to OSC
 - March 23: OSC approved report to be submitted to the final Executive meeting.
4. That the visits be scheduled where possible on either a Thursday

or Friday.

5. That the appropriate arrangements be made for members to attend drop-in sessions for Early Years parents at Sunshine House and/or the Walworth OSS - as proposed by officers, - with the view to ask parents about their experiences obtaining EY places for their children, in line with the draft questions.
6. That officers provide statistics on the proportionate numbers of children in the different EY provider settings across the borough.

7. PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

- 7.1 The chair invited suggestions from members on how the sub-committee could approach and undertake its review of parental engagement in primary schools.
- 7.2 The Assistant Director of Children's Services explained that Home School Agreements are voluntary for parents, but that all schools are expected to provide these. She noted that one Headteacher had commented that the agreements are not worth the paper they are written on, as he believes that they are no substitute for the actions schools take everyday to establish good working relationships with parents. She added that throughout her involvement with schools, the agreements have never been mentioned, even in relation to a behavioural or exclusion issue.
- 7.3 The Assistant Director further noted that as the agreements are voluntary, many parents do not complete and return them to the schools. Moreover, when a relationship between a family and school starts to break down, schools do not refer back to the agreement as a means to compel compliance or cooperation. Relationships between parents and schools are also largely harmonious and that the key issue here is about how parents engage with their child(ren)'s learning.
- 7.4 A member referred to the policy of a local Academy, which does not allow pupils to start attending school until the Home School Agreement has been signed. The Assistant Director responded that she would question the legality of that requirement, and expects that admission could not be contingent on an agreement being signed.
- 7.5 The chair queried the merit of possibly playing down the significance of the agreements, as making the schools' expectations of parents clear must in some cases be of benefit. The Assistant Director responded that she thinks that the schools work hard to explain their expectations and that what is written in the agreements is very important, but that Headteachers have

indicated that what is done on an everyday basis has more influence. She added that if the agreements could be used pro-actively, that they could significantly help some of the children discussed earlier.

- 7.6 A member commented that the sub-committee needs to know what parental involvement measures are and how they can be improved. It was also suggested that the sub-committee should try to assess why in some schools in deprived areas all children bring their homework books back the next day, whereas in other similar schools many children forget to return their books.
- 7.7 Members also suggested that the sub-committee talk with school governors and parents where possible, rather than simply Headteachers, in order to obtain a more balanced picture of the issue. Members also agreed that in view of the limited time left for the review, that the objective should be to identify good practice that might help some schools to improve their engagement.
- 7.8 Members considered how best to obtain the view of parents. It was anticipated, for example, that if schools were to invite parents to attend a meeting, that the parents who would attend are more likely to already be engaged; also that permission from Headteachers would be needed for members to approach parents in school playgrounds, as is done by Ofsted inspectors.

RESOLVED:

1. That site visits be arranged for members to attend approximately 4 local primary schools (2 community schools and 2 faith schools), with the view to speak with the Headteacher, a school governor and possibly parents and children, to raise questions about parental engagement;
2. and to query the Headteachers, for example, on whether there are significant numbers of parents that they find 'hard-to-reach' and what strategies they may employ to engage with these parents.

8. INFORMATION ITEMS

8.1 Impact of the Lakanal Fire on resident children

Members commended the fact that 81% of children affected by the Lakanal House fire had returned to school within five days. Members queried, however, what assistance the children received once they were back at school. Pauline explained that an educational psychologist was provided at each school and

activities coordinated for the children at Cator St, as the incident occurred so close to the summer holiday. Advice was also provided to the schools on how they could support the children, and Pauline observed that Brunswick Park primary school (where most of the affected children attend) is known for effectively supporting children's emotional development.

8.2 Sports Provision

A member referred to the October 29 letter from Romi Bowen in response to the sub-committee's queries regarding sport provision. It was suggested that the DCFS be requested to clarify what is meant by access to 5 hours of sports activities weekly, - in particular whether the expectation is that this is provided by schools.

8.3 Co-option of a voting Headteachers' Executive representative

The chair commented that he would support the co-option of a voting representative of the Headteachers' Executive, as the voting status could support the representative's engagement in the sub-committee's work. Other members agreed. It was therefore suggested, that in view of the legal complications that would first need to be resolved, that the sub-committee invite a representative of the Headteachers' Executive to attend and contribute to the sub-committee's meetings in a non-voting capacity in the meantime.

RESOLVED:

Lakanal Fire

That education officers be requested to provide a brief written update on the general wellbeing of the children affected by the fire several months on; and to confirm whether any of the children have been referred for further adolescent psychological counselling.

Sports provision

That a letter be sent to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), requesting that they clarify what is meant by 5 hours of sports provision per week.

Co-opted members

- i. That, subject to the approval of the OSC chair and vice-chair, the sub-committee invites the Headteachers' Executive to appoint a representative to become a non-voting member of the sub-committee for the remainder of the 2009/10 civic year; and

- ii. That the sub-committee asks OSC to consider introducing a co-opted members voting rights scheme, which would apply across all the scrutiny committees, when the scrutiny arrangements are re-established following the 2010 council elections.
- iii. That a letter be sent to the Headteachers' Executive, inviting the attendance of a representative at the next two meetings, briefly outlining the issues that the sub-committee is considering; and explaining that the provision for co-opting voting members is being looked into.

9. 2009/10 WORK PROGRAMME

- 9.1 Members discussed the sub-committee's proposed work programme for the remainder of the municipal year. In view of interest shown in a current council project for 14 to 19 year olds, involving the Learning Skills Councils and other providers, an update and overview of the initiative was requested.

RESOLVED:

1. That the report back on the review of integrated youth provision listed for the January 19 meeting, be shifted to the March 2 meeting;
2. and that an overview of the project for 14 to 19 year olds coordinated by the Learning Skills Council also be added to the March meeting.

The meeting closed at 9.30pm.