

**SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL 2 – 2020/2021
CHILDREN’S SERVICES OFSTED IMPROVEMENT**

MINUTES OF THE MEETING

Date: Wednesday 11 November 2020

Time: 19:00

Venue: Virtual Meeting – MS Teams

Attendees:

Councillor Karanvir Dhadwal (Chair), Councillor Seema Kumar (Vice Chair), Paul Adair (Co-optee), Councillor Praveen Anand, Councillor Sitarah Anjum, Councillor Jaskiran Chohan, Councillor Tariq Mahmood, Councillor Gary Malcolm, Councillor Swaran Padda, Councillor Chris Summers

The Chair welcomed members and officers to the meeting.

1. Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

There were none.

2. Urgent Matters

There were no urgent matters.

3. Matters to be Considered in Private

There were none.

4. Declarations of Interest

There were none.

5. Minutes

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 8 July 2020 be approved as the correct record of the meeting.

6. Panel Operations

Harjeet Bains, Scrutiny Review Officer, introduced the Panel Operations report which set out the Panel’s Terms of Reference and its Work Programme for the remainder of the year and recommended that the Panel co-opt Mr Paul Adair (Headteacher, Castlebar Primary School) onto the Panel for the year due to his expertise in children’s social care.

Mr Adair explained to the Panel that Castlebar was one of the six special schools in the borough. The age range of the pupils at the school was 4-11 years and many had complex learning difficulties. He also sat on several committees and boards within the local authority including the Ealing Learning Partnership

Safeguarding & Wellbeing Committee and the Ealing Safeguarding Children Board.

On considering the work programme, the Chair asked the officers to invite one of the three chairmen of the Children's Equality's Group to the next meeting at which the services for care leavers, regional adoption arrangements and children's performance data were to be considered. The Panel was also keen that, if possible, an adopter's experience be shared at the meeting via a video recording.

Resolved: That the Panel:

- (a) Accepted its Terms of Reference as set out in the report.
- (b) Agreed the co-option of Mr Paul Adair to the Panel.
- (c) Agreed the provisional Work Programme in Appendix 2 of the report.
- (d) Requested that one of the three chairmen of the Children's Equalities Group be invited to give their views at the next meeting and, if possible, an adopter's experience shared via a video recording.

7. Overview of Children's Social Care Services, the 2019 Ofsted Inspection and its Outcomes

Carolyn Fair, Director Children and Families and Gary Jones, Assistant Director Children's Social Care, presented a strategic overview of the Council's Children's Social Care Services, the 2019 Ofsted Inspection and its outcomes.

It was highlighted that:

- The Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) was one of a cycle of inspections for Local Authorities in Ealing and Wales. The inspection gave a view on the quality of work to support and safeguard children and young people in Ealing. Therefore, the authority needed to carefully consider the inspection findings and progress being made against inspection priority actions.
- The current Ofsted regulatory and inspection system took place over a 3-year cycle and local authorities were subject to one graded inspection within that 3-year cycle and up to two focused visits and/or a Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) visit. The ILACS process also involved an Annual Engagement meeting between Ofsted and the authority each year. The authority was required to submit a self-assessment ahead of this meeting.
- Ealing had an ILACS in November 2019 and was graded as requiring improvement. The inspectors identified the following six areas that required further improvement:
 - Social work capacity and allocation of cases.
 - The quality and timeliness of responses to referrals, including strategy discussions and child protection enquiries.
 - The quality and consistency of management oversight and challenge by the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs).

- Sufficiency of accommodation, including the range of accommodation options for care leavers.
 - The quality and accuracy of performance reporting and quality assurance activities particularly the data reports.
 - The quality of responses to children and young people who were at risk of being homeless and children on the edge of care.
- Subsequently, the Children's Social Care Service compiled an Improvement Action Plan incorporating the Ofsted recommendations. The service had added an additional seventh connected priority to seek, represent and listen to the voices of children and families. The action plan was now a year in from the implementation. It was overseen and monitored fortnightly by the Children's Services Improvement Board chaired by the Executive Director of Children, Adults and Public Health and reported monthly to the Portfolio Holder, Leader and Chief Executive. Reporting to the Children's Services Improvement Board had an increased focus on evidencing outcomes for children in line with the Ofsted inspection framework grade descriptors and reporting on data exceptions.
 - The virtual annual engagement meeting took place in September 2019, slightly later than scheduled due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The inspectors noted the improvement in Ealing's self-assessment including the response to staff and families in the COVID-19 context.
 - The routine Ofsted inspections had been suspended over the pandemic period but inspectors expected to undertake a series of assurance visits instead. This would involve five inspectors looking at the entire system over three weeks including three days on site. Ealing anticipated an assurance visit in early 2021.
 - The focused assurance meetings would evaluate the quality and impact of practice within a challenging context for the previous six months primarily in the three practice areas of help and protection; children in care and care leavers; and impact of leaders.
 - The service, in accordance with the Council's response to Black Lives Matter movement, had recently started a Children's Equality Group which had three chairmen. The Panel would be updated on the progress at the next meeting as the group would have met several times by then.
 - Attention was drawn to the draft children and adults social care workforce strategy 2020-2023, the associated workforce action plan for 2020-2021 and the annual workforce return for 2019-2020. The joint children's and adults' social care strategy was seen as a strength because there was one approach to the borough's vulnerable population regarding workforce development. The return was submitted every November so it would be updated before submission at the end of the month. The action plan was monitored fortnightly by the Board.
 - Ealing's social worker workforce was reflective of the comparative London social worker population, although Ealing had a slightly higher representation of under 30-year olds and a higher proportion were from a Black or Asian minority ethnic group (BAME). Ealing, like many other London authorities, had a young workforce with a short tenure (e.g. 39% had less than two years'

service) that could impact on practice standards and service delivery if development and retention of workers were not maintained.

- Ealing's children's social worker recruitment statistics compared favourably with the London social worker workforce. For example, Ealing had lower agency and vacancy rates compared to the rest of London. Furthermore, Ealing's permanent workforce expanded significantly (by 8.6%) between September 2018 and September 2019 which reflected relative success recruiting social workers onto permanent contracts. Nonetheless, there remained a high reliance on agency staff which was indicative of further demand for services and a shortfall in the supply of workers.
- During the first lockdown the service took immediate action to adapt their practice and service delivery to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was to safeguard children and young people in the borough and best social work practice. The care leavers received food parcels, increased subsistence payments and additional financial support for those who required it. The Ealing Safeguarding Children Partnership continued to meet virtually and responded well to the challenges. A risk register was in place and overseen by the partnership. The staff received support to ensure that their mental and physical wellbeing was a priority.
- Staff used WhatsApp and Skype for virtual visits to children and carers where there were less concerns so children were looked after in stable placements. One of the biggest challenges was of children not being in schools which was vital in detecting any initial safeguarding issues with their pupils. The special schools remained open during the lockdown as their students were classified as vulnerable.
- Schools were contacted virtually but this was irregular as they were busy addressing other educational matters online with their students. Staff continued to see children where there were safeguarding concerns but took the necessary precautions. Staff were provided with the appropriate personal protective equipment in line with the public health guidance.
- The call duty service continued to work on a rota basis from Perceval House whilst the rest of the staff worked from home. There was increased engagement from the adolescent young people who preferred virtual contact. There was more virtual interaction with the various social work professionals. The service adapted well in moving things to a virtual platform during the first lockdown which prepared them well for the second one.

After the presentations, the Panel asked the following key questions:

- How had the improvement in the quality and accuracy of the data and performance reporting progressed?
- Was the capacity of the data quality officers sustainable for the next 6-12 months particularly in the difficult COVID-19 situation?
- Did the Council have a robust performance measurement system in place to identify underperformance early?
- What was the shared vision across the children's safeguarding services?

- How was the service dealing with the increase in domestic violence referrals?
- What was being done about reducing the costs associated with the high percentage of agency staff within the service?
- Had consideration been given, in liaison with the Portfolio Holder, to offering higher salaries in attracting and retaining the right staff despite the incredibly challenging financial environment?
- What were the other aspects of the recruitment package?
- What psychological support was provided to care leavers, particularly asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors, who would have experienced trauma, separation and loss of a family?
- How had the virtual meetings compared with the physical meetings?
- Could a list of the acronyms used in the agenda documentation be circulated to the Panel?

In response to the questions asked, the presenters confirmed that:

- The programme of work around data and performance reporting was underway. The programme would run until October 2021. The service was being supported by an organisation called BetterGov to deliver the Mosaic upgrade and improvements. There had been significant improvements in the quality of data reporting as it was a priority area.
- The service had recruited new data quality officers within the performance team. The team was under immense pressure in response to COVID-19 so an additional interim resource had been provided to undertake this work.
- There was a rigorous approach to understanding the performance data. The Power BI system was a dynamic tool which enabled the service heads to monitor the key performance indicators in real time and a visual way on an hourly/daily basis. The service had the appropriate tools in ensuring that the officers were ahead of any challenging curves. There was a vigorous sharing of information across the partnership. The Partnership Board consisting of council, education, health and police representatives considered a detailed monthly report.
- Most priorities within the improvement plan summary were progressing well against the set timescales. However, there had been limited progress on some priorities such as domestic abuse hub, quality and range of housing provision for care leavers, and robust performance management mainly due to the pandemic. The service received a high number of domestic violence referrals and had recently recruited two staff skilled in supporting such victims.
- The service achieved a very high level of engagement with looked after children but found participation and engagement of children/young people in child protection conferences more challenging. The service was seeking different approaches and a survey with a closing date for the end of October

2020 had gone out to this group. The feedback received would be reported to the Panel at the next meeting.

- There was a unified vision on ensuring that the borough's children and young people were given every opportunity to flourish by safeguarding them at every possible point. There was a single approach in assisting children and families in the borough. Ensuring an environment that allowed young people to thrive was a key priority within the Council's Future Ealing programme.
- There had been a marginal increase in the domestic violence referrals at the beginning of the pandemic but a significant reduction during the first lockdown. The figures had reduced to slightly more than normal levels since then. The service was doing more work at the start in providing a robust response which enabled mental support for families as early as possible.
- The agency staff costs for children's social workers were about 14% higher than permanent staff which had a significant impact on the service's budget. Ealing had 26% (17.9% in 2019) of agency staff. For some authorities across London this varied from 20-45%. The high cost of living in London was the main deterrent for many younger social workers. They often chose to move elsewhere after completing their training for more affordable accommodation. The service was considering various ways of recruiting and retaining permanent staff particularly in a challenging COVID-19 pandemic environment.
- The children's social work was by nature a profession where individuals risked burnout. Therefore, the service focused immensely on the support and wellbeing of staff. The offer of support was enhanced in the last eight months due to the pandemic. Ealing had an impressive record of people who stayed for a long time with a large number of the management team having been there for over 10 years.
- The service had previously benchmarked with other authorities on the social worker pay and intended to do this again. Ealing had been in the middle of the league table as some inner London boroughs paid more. However, Ealing had very frequently seen some social workers return so the likely issue was deemed to be the promotion of the offer and not increased salaries. Experienced social workers tended to stay longer whilst the newly qualified chose to leave on completion of their two years' training.
- The service had a series of programmes in place to actively recruit a permanent workforce of both newly qualified and experienced social workers.
- Other aspects of the social worker recruitment package included support that was offered to do a difficult job, regular supervision, clear reporting lines to management, lower caseloads and a high quality ongoing training that was unique to Ealing. Ealing was part of the West London Alliance training conglomerate which worked with different sectors to better match the training offer with the business needs.
- There was an impact on supporting staff during the lockdown as the BAME group were disproportionately affected by the virus. There were regular weekly communications with the staff updating them on the issues as well as advice and guidance. Individual risk assessments for all staff were conducted

and the needs addressed accordingly. Shielding staff did not undertake any physical meetings. Some staff had lost family members and a foster carer had died during the pandemic.

- A team of psychologists was part of the Brighter Futures programme. Each service, including the carer leavers service, had a dedicated psychologist who provided consultation, advice and support to vulnerable children. A lead psychologist had been recruited in the Leaving Care team who worked closely with the unaccompanied asylum seeking young people by screening for emotional and mental health difficulties. Children's Mental Health Services could be accessed by young people who required that level of support. Ealing uniquely had clinical psychologists embedded throughout the statutory teams enabling direct access to consultation for social workers. The carers for young people also received ongoing training around trauma informed work.
- It was acknowledged that there were advantages and disadvantages to both virtual and physical meetings. Generally, social workers preferred physical meetings as some things such as bruises were difficult to detect online. However, there had been better professional interactions in virtual meetings regarding care plans and approaches with families that were being supported. Experience showed that young people, particularly autistic children, tended to engage more in virtual meetings. The service intended to deploy both methods going forward – for example, a risk assessment could be conducted virtually prior to a physical visit.
- A glossary of some terms and abbreviations was included in the back of the documentation but Members could submit any additional acronyms requiring clarity after the meeting.

Resolved: That the Panel:

- (a) Thanked the service officers for the detailed presentation and noted the ongoing progress made to date in the Ofsted Improvement Plan Summary.
- (b) Commended the approach taken by the Children's Social Care Service in dealing with the challenging needs of the borough's vulnerable families and the staff over the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic.
- (c) Conveyed its condolences to everybody who had lost a loved one over the pandemic.
- (d) Directed members to email any additional acronyms requiring clarity to the officers.

8. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next scheduled meeting was on Wednesday 3 February 2021.

Duration of Meeting

7.03pm to 8.08pm.