

**SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL 2 – 2020/2021
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OFSTED IMPROVEMENTS**

MINUTES OF THE MEETING

Date: Wednesday 3 February 2021

Time: 19:00

Venue: Virtual Meeting – Zoom

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 Miriam Rice

1. Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies were received from Councillor Chris Summers.

Councillor Miriam Rice was present as a substitute for Councillor Chris Summers.

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 11 November 2020 were agreed as a correct record of the meeting:

6. Care Leavers, Regional Adoption Arrangements and Children's Performance Data

Carolyn Fair (Director Children and Families), Gary Jones (Assistant Director, Children's Social Care) and Debbie Gabriel (Head of Service – Adopt London West, Regional Adoption Agency) presented updates on the Children's Equality Group, care leavers independent accommodation, regional adoption arrangements and children's performance data.

In updating the Panel on the Children's Equality Group (CEG), Carolyn Fair highlighted that:

- In the summer of 2020, the directorate set up the CEG in response to the black lives matter movement.
- The vision of the CEG was Equality, Equity and Empowerment. It would focus on racism and ethnicity-based discrimination as a protected characteristic over the next 18-20 months.
- The CEG was co-chaired by three senior managers – Judith Chambers-Thomas (Principal Education Psychologist), Angie Dennison (Supportive Action for Families in Ealing (SAFE) Strategy Manager and Carol Yates (Head of Service Leaving Care, At Risk of Homelessness, Unaccompanied Minors and Housing Support). The Co-Chairs fed back issues that staff raised at the forums to the senior management team.
- The CEG had met three times since inception and around 70 staff had attended the forums. A further meeting was due to be held later that week which would focus on the staff concerns around COVID-19 vaccinations. A large proportion of the staff were from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups.
- An additional smaller core group of 20 members from across children's services was created to help determine the agenda planning and direction of travel for the forum.
- In November 2020, the core group met with David Weaver as part of Ealing's Big Conversation with staff. This assisted with the key priorities for an action plan.

In updating the Panel on the care leavers independent accommodation, Carolyn Fair explained that:

- The inspectors had expressed concern about accommodation quality and availability for Ealing's care leavers during the 2019 OFSTED Inspection.
- The average age that care leavers left the family home to live independently was 18 years compared to 25 years for most other young people. Many care leavers came from traumatic beginnings so had more challenges in managing independent living.
- The Council ensured that care leavers moved from a semi-independent accommodation where they were prepared for independence into permanent accommodation. In the last decade, this had been in council tenancies known as quota accommodation.
- There had been particular challenges in the last three years in the availability of quota accommodation which meant that the care leavers were not in a position to secure permanent accommodation as easily as in the past. Some of the reasons for this included the number of homes being decanted during

the Council's major regeneration programme. This had impacted on the availability of single unit occupancy homes leading to a backlog of quota properties. The costs of private rented accommodation in London were significantly higher than nationally and many landlords did not want to take on tenants on benefits.

- Over the last year, children's services had worked with housing services in dealing with the backlog of young people waiting for or looking to move into accommodation. There was a joint Housing Panel chaired by Mark Wiltshire (Director of Community Development) which met bi-monthly with oversight from Councillor Julian Bell, Councillor Yvonne Johnson and Cllr David Millican. The care leaver accommodation was only one part of the Council's responsibility for housing residents which made it more challenging to ensure that all those in need had availability of permanent secure housing.
- There were presently 81 young people ready to move into their accommodation. The service had about 20 quota accommodations a year and had successfully moved the 2019/20 cohort. So far, 22 bidding agreements had been secured for 2020/21 with only two secured actual tenancies. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in less single unit tenancies because fewer people were moving on and so scarcer properties available.
- In the feedback from the Care Leaver survey in April/May 2020, young people expressed concern about not having permanent accommodation.

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

- How did the care leaver accommodation figures for 2019/20 compare with previous years?
- Despite Ealing's challenges, what could be learnt from other boroughs?
- What follow-up support was provided to the care leavers moving into privately rented housing?
- How did the service deal with the miscommunication that the care leavers received regarding other boroughs?
- How was the children's service coping with the challenging budget situation?
- Was the service satisfied with the type of accommodation provision available for young people in the current developments within the borough?
- How had the discussions on the potential care leavers rent guarantor scheme progressed?
- Was the Council able to top-up the £350 per week cost for a semi-independent accommodation at the YMCA to enable a young person to move into privately rented independent accommodation?

- What support was provided to a young person in transitioning from a semi-independent to an independent accommodation?
- How did the Council determine the quota accommodation allocation for the young people?
- Had there been instances of housing applications by care leavers which had not been progressed any further?

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

- The service worked with an annual target of 20 young people into quota accommodation each year. Hence, the backlog for the 2019/20 of securing 20 quota accommodation had now been achieved. There had been single figures in the previous year which the service was able to accommodate. However, for 2020/21 only two young people had presently secured quota accommodation. The service was endeavouring to get the number of young people approved early in the year to assist them in their bids for accommodation as quickly as possible.
- The service would focus on supporting with additional resource to help young people navigate the system for independent accommodation and then secure their bidding more swiftly.
- The care leaver accommodation processes differed in the boroughs. Some of the neighbouring boroughs provided accommodation for all care leavers but did not bid successfully. This meant that they got through the first process but still needed to bid to find properties. It also depended on the demand and what stock the boroughs had available. There was a high level of demand for single unit tenancies in Ealing which impacted on the numbers available for care leavers. This work was ongoing and a priority for the organisation.
- The care leavers were supported until they were 25 years old. The service undertook intensive focused action in the early stages to help prepare the young people for independence. It provided financial support where necessary and kept in touch with the particularly vulnerable young people to ensure that they were managing. The Council had recently committed to care leavers no longer having to pay any council tax. The service provided some start-up support to the young people in setting up their flats including a leaving care grant. The service monitored the progress of the care leavers monthly and provided any additional support required. As the Corporate Parent, the Council continued to support the care leavers for as long as possible to give them the best opportunities.
- Communication with the young people was central to the service as their feedback helped to drive the service provision. Ealing had a strong Corporate Parent Panel (CPP) which listened to the young people. The CPP met quarterly, presently virtually, and was a very powerful voice for the young people particularly regarding how other boroughs presented information. However, boroughs varied and those outside of London had more availability of housing. For Ealing, it was about what it did for the young people and

what they felt was being done to support them to be in accommodation that met their needs. The young people had been very involved in all the work that had been done so far. For example, several young people had expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of some semi-independent accommodation provision. The service had made improvements to the accommodation which the young people could see. Prior to the regeneration projects beginning, the Council was able to house a large number of young people in social housing. However, while regeneration projects were underway meeting the housing needs of care leavers in Council owned accommodation would be more challenging for the next three years. The service felt it was important to communicate with the young people in giving them the best opportunity to a range of needs and accommodations. The private rented sector had worked well for some young people particularly unaccompanied young people who enjoyed sharing a house.

- The importance of securing permanent housing for the young people also supported the budget position. It was important to secure permanent accommodation for the young people as quickly as possible. Therefore, anything that the service did to support young people was also the right thing for the Council's budget.
- The conversations with developers were always encouraging them to think about the appropriate level of social housing provision. The Council's existing accommodation ought to be reassessed when it became empty to establish whether it could be redeveloped innovatively for a different use. The Leader of the Council was supportive of the ongoing work between Children's Services and Housing Services.
- The scheduled discussions in January 2021 with an external organisation regarding a potential care leavers rent guarantor scheme had been cancelled due to the COVID-19 lockdown. However, Carol Yates was arranging to meet with officers at Kent County Council which had implemented a successful scheme which supported young people within the private rented sector.
- It was important to support young people into sustainable independent accommodation where they could reside longer term. The young people could achieve this by using housing benefits and other accessible funds. It would be challenging for the Council to top-up the difference in rent as the young people would become reliant on this top-up for the long term. There had been a significant impact on the budget in retaining young people longer in semi-independent accommodation due to the lack of affordable permanent accommodation. It was equally important for the young people to live independently and successfully manage their own finances.
- Each year there were about 80 young people who turned 18 years of age requiring support from the Council. This year, the Council had only secured housing for a quarter of this number. Some of the young people went into social tenancies, private rented accommodation and university. Every young person had regular contact with a social worker or a personal advisor. The head of service reviewed the cases monthly and the Council continued to provide appropriate support to a care leaver until the age of 25 years.

- The service undertook a detailed assessment of the needs of the young people in deciding the quota accommodation allocation. For example, with the current paucity for quota housing the focus had been on the more vulnerable as they required secure lifelong tenancies. Therefore, young people likely to struggle in the private rented market were considered first for quota housing and given appropriate additional support.
- There had been some occasions where the Council had paused the housing application for care leavers, for example when a young person was unable to manage independent living at the time due to a mental health breakdown.

In updating the Panel on Adopt London West, Debbie Gabriel highlighted that:

- Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) were created nationally to improve the recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters plus speed up the matching and placement of children for adoption. In 2018, four RAAs were established across London (North, South, East and West) to work collaboratively on areas that would contribute to an improved equitable standard of services to families. The collaboration became “Adopt London”. The Adopt London West (ALW) RAA consisted of the four West London boroughs of Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham and Hounslow. It was agreed that Ealing would be the host borough for the ALW RAA. The relevant staff from the other boroughs were transferred to Ealing under TUPE legislation on 3 September 2019 and the ALW went live from 1 October 2019.
- The ALW had only existed for a few months when the COVID-19 Pandemic began. It presented additional challenges and the services had to be reconvened differently. The team had adjusted accordingly and focused on giving the best experience to the adopters coming through the recruitment and assessment process. Equally important was the ongoing family finding activity that was required to be undertaken to find new adoptive families for children.
- The government provided additional adoption support funding in response to the pandemic which had enabled the RAAs to collaboratively commission and deliver services quickly across London. The collaboration had the benefit of raising standards of adoption services and equity for adopters and special guardians throughout London. The RAAs established a strong partnership with We Are Family, an adopter-led peer support organisation, in developing a comprehensive webinar programme.

After the presentation, the Panel asked the following questions:

- Why was Ealing’s share of the Adoption Support Fund significantly bigger than that of the other three partner boroughs?
- How was the service encouraging the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community to consider adoption?

- Why was the ALW awarded the least amount in respect of the Covid-19 Emergency Fund compared to the other RAAs?
- What was the difference between domestic and private adoptions?
- What was the criteria mentioned in the Dom and Jorge case study and why had Ealing accepted them as adopters after they had been turned down in east London for failing to meet a criteria?
- What were the reasons for adopters to withdraw applications?

In response to the questions asked, the presenter confirmed:

- An initial exercise in joining the RAA had established what each partner borough currently spent on their adoption provision. Ealing had a proud tradition of very high quality support for the adopters and special guardians so the budget for those services reflected this. Ealing was clear about not changing the level or quality of support that it offered. The ALW agreed the overall budget to be the sum of the individual budgets. Going forward, consideration would be given to change the budget contribution to reflect the quality of the service.
- Ealing had a very strong connection with the LGBT community and the ALW continued to do the same. For the first time, there had recently been a government funded generalised national campaign which raised awareness of adoption targeted at the LGBT community to encourage adopters to come forward. In February-March 2021, there would be specific London focus on encouraging adopters from the LGBT community. The blogging and messages on the Council's website displayed images of gay couples. The ALW had a partnership with New Family Social, an organisation founded by gay adopters, which encouraged the community and support network of peer-to-peer support to come forward.
- The Covid-19 Emergency Fund was based on the local authority funding formula which was determined by Whitehall. Therefore, the ALW had slightly less funding than the Adopt London East RAA, as West London authorities received less central government funding than East London authorities.
- Domestic adoptions were where the local authority was family finding to recruit adopters to place children. Private adoptions were applications from families who wished to adopt a child that was already part of their family, usually a step-parent. Inter-country adoption was the adoption of children who came from other countries. The ALW had a contract with the inter-country adoption centre who managed these adoptions. The domestic referrals were for those children who usually came through care proceedings or were looked after by the local authority.
- Individual adoption agencies had their own recruitment criteria prior to the establishment of the RAAs. Some agencies had very rigid criteria and turned people down on quite spurious grounds which had been the case with Dom and Jorge. The government was keen for the RAAs to address this issue so some national principles were agreed that all adoption agencies were

required to follow. Ealing was inclusive and welcomed adopters from different backgrounds.

- There were various reasons why adopters withdrew applications including a change in economic circumstances, change in minds about the time being right for them and an adverse health event.

Susie and David Dye, a couple who had recently adopted two year old Delilah, related their experience of the adoption process to the Panel:

- Susie Dye had attended an adoption information event in March 2019 and expressed an interest in adopting a child. After initial conversations with the service officers the couple were advised that they were not quite ready for adoption. They were asked to do some further work before reconsideration.
- Subsequently, the couple returned to the service in August 2019 and successfully entered stage one of the adoption process in September 2019. The matching panel took place in October 2020 and Delilah was placed with the couple in mid-November 2020.
- They felt that it was initially hard to build a relationship with the two social workers who were also judging their suitability. However, they found Ealing's team of professionals empathetic and established a good relationship with them. During the process the couple also had contact with the teams at the neighbouring boroughs of Hounslow and Hammersmith & Fulham. The communication during the second stage in January 2020 took place through video calls.
- The couple joined a peer group of adopters from across West London and during the first stage had found the group training sessions useful and informative. A WhatsApp group of the peers helped to share experiences and learn from others.
- The couple had found the adoption process life changing. They felt that the foster carers were very good and had introduced them to Delilah as 'Mummy and Daddy'. Delilah still had a brother with the foster carers. The couple would honour the birth mother's request that Delilah be baptised and brought up as a Christian. The pandemic lockdowns had enabled them to bond with the child.

After the presentations, the Panel commended the couple for sharing their unique experience and asked the following questions:

- How could Ealing's adoption process be improved?
- What advice could be given to a new adopting couple?
- What support was being provided to the couple regarding the sibling with foster carers and informing Delilah about her adoption?

In response to the questions asked, the presenters responded:

- It had been a long journey. There had been unavoidable changes in personnel during the course of the process but were grateful for the same supportive social worker throughout. The coordinating of nearly 15 different professionals during the whole process was quite time consuming. The uncertain timelines made it difficult for the couple to make firm plans regarding their own employment matters. Their employers had been very supportive and understanding about the lengthy process which had helped enormously.
- The nationally imposed syllabus for the training days was too extensive for the time available. Consideration should be given to condensing the information to make the process more manageable and effective.
- Everyone involved in the adoption process was quite stressed because they wanted to get everything right. The whole experience was emotionally intensive and sensitive. The Councillors should contemplate speaking to and supporting the social care staff to fully understand what was involved in these highly demanding roles.
- Recognising quite early on in the process that everything was about the best interest of the child which took some getting used to.
- The advice to a new couple would be to check out the different adoption agencies before deciding on which one to use. They had already recommended ALW to a colleague.
- The couple were in regular contact with the foster carers and have had direct contact with Delilah's brother several times since the placement. It was anticipated that this would continue. The couple were open to direct contact with the birth family but the mother was not engaging presently. The couple awaited feedback from the officers on a draft settling-in letter for the birth mother. The couple were due to meet the psychologist that Friday and would seek advice about how best to talk to a two year old child about her adoption. They anticipated this journey for the next 10-20 years of Delilah's life and letting it be her story to tell others. The stigma around adoption had changed profoundly nowadays.

In updating the Panel on the progress in children's performance data for the period April-November 2020, Carolyn Fair and Gary Jones outlined that:

- Senior managers monitored progress weekly to ensure that additional support was provided to the teams where necessary.
- The senior management group monitored children's data monthly.
- The Children's Safeguarding Partnership Board regularly monitored children's performance data to ensure that the service was safeguarding vulnerable children.
- There had been a total of 8,556 contacts with the service for the year so far. This was a reduction of 12% compared to 9,718 in the previous year. 60% of

the contacts originated from the police and health services, with contacts from the police and schools resulting in more referrals.

- The rolling 12-month average for enquiry to referral conversion remained at 30% but the April-November 2020 rate was slightly lower at 28%. In November 2020, the referrals at 333 were above the average 300 for the year.
- The COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions caused a 38% reduction in referrals in the year so far. The April-November 2020 referral rate per 10,000 was at 292.6 compared to 468.9 for the same time in the previous year. This was below the statistical neighbours' average of 538.5 and national average at 534.8.
- The re-referral year to date rate remained high at nearly 23% despite the continued downward direction. This was higher than that of the statistical neighbours at 18.83% but in line with the national average of 22.60%. Ealing had large sibling groups returning within 12 months. There were 67 re-referrals in November 2020 made up by 40 families, equating to an average of 1.67 children per family. The biggest sibling groups were four families of four children.
- The total number of Section 47s (children at risk of significant harm) to date was 611 compared to 903 for the same period in the previous year, a reduction of 32%.
- Child protection registrations increased by 3% to 22% compared to 12% in the previous year. In the last month, six of the seven children re-registered were from the same family. 82% of all re-registered children lasted on the plan between 1-12 years prior.
- At the start of a child protection investigation the service had about 15 days in which to go to conference. The year to date performance for child protection conferences was 65%, mostly due to the disruption of March-April 2020. It exceeded the previous year's figure of 61% but was below the expected 80%.

After the presentations, the Panel asked the following questions:

- What was the reason for the high enquiry rate in November 2020?
- How was the service ensuring that children were safeguarded whilst studying from home?
- Why was Ealing's rate of re-referrals higher than that of the statistical neighbours?

In response to the questions asked, the presenters responded:

- The COVID-19 pandemic had a big impact on the number of enquiries received. During the first lockdown in March-April 2020, there were very low numbers of enquires received as children were schooled at home. However,

as the schools re-opened to broader groups of children the number of enquiries went up in November-December 2020. The schools were critical in identifying children and young people at risk of harm.

- The schools were becoming increasingly sophisticated in online and video learning with families. The school staff tracked and quickly referred children who were not visible online or on video. The schools liaised directly with social workers and staff about any particular concerns regarding vulnerable children. The children's service maintained high levels of communication with schools and had an agreement in place on signposting concerns. It was anticipated that the impact of the previous year would be felt by the vulnerable families and the service for some time to come. The service was expecting the number of referrals to rise once the schools reopened fully as the most vulnerable families had been impacted most adversely by the pandemic.
- Ealing's higher re-referral rates were due to various factors such as the size of the family, the demand and seasonal variations. Ealing had quite a high proportion of large sibling groups which distorted the figures quite quickly. There were families with six or more children and one had 13 children. The service monitored the rates for consistency and informed decision making.

Resolved: That the presentations be noted.

7. Panel Work Programme

Harjeet Bains (Overview and Scrutiny Officer) confirmed that the Panel was scheduled to consider the Ealing Children Short Breaks Service provision at Haydock Avenue and the Panel's draft summary final report at the next meeting. The next meeting was the last meeting and the Panel needed to deliberate what recommendations to make in its final report.

Resolved: That the Panel agreed its work programme.

8. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting was on Wednesday 31 March 2021.

Duration of Meeting

7.03pm to 8.40pm.