

Decisions of the Children and Education Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Committee

15 January 2024

Members Present:-

Councillor Giulia Monasterio (Chair)

Councillor Joshua Conway	Councillor Tony Vourou
Councillor Anne Hutton	Naomi Phillips
Councillor David Longstaff	Tamzin Arora
Councillor Matthew Perlberg	

Apologies for Absence

Councillor Lucy Wakeley	Raisel Freedman
Councillor Woodcock-Velleman	

1. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The following corrections to the minutes of the last meeting were noted:

- Co-opted Member Nigel Wildish said he was present at the last meeting but this had not been recorded in the minutes; and
- Co-opted Member Anne O'Shea gave her apologies at the last meeting but this had not been recorded in the minutes.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 21 September 2023 be approved as a correct record.

2. ABSENCE OF MEMBERS (IF ANY)

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Wakeley, Councillor Woodcock-Velleman and Raisel Freedman (Co-Opted Member).

3. DECLARATION OF MEMBERS' DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS AND OTHER INTERESTS (IF ANY)

None.

4. REPORT OF THE MONITORING OFFICER (IF ANY)

None.

5. PUBLIC COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS (IF ANY)

None.

6. MEMBERS' ITEMS (IF ANY)

None.

7. SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN IN BARNET

The Chair announced that the exempt reports for the Family Services item would be considered at a separate meeting due to technical issues with accessing the private area on the Modern.Gov app. This was unanimously agreed.

The Strategic Lead for Children's Services gave a brief overview of the safeguarding arrangements in Barnet and the work of the Barnet Safeguarding Children Partnership. This included statutory membership from the Police, Health and Local Authority, and wider involvement from Education, Probation and other local organisations. It was reported that a multi-agency team of independent scrutineers had been commissioned to conduct an annual review of the work undertaken.

The Partnership Manager said their role was to support the Partnership produce the statutory annual report and disseminate learning.

The Lead Independent Scrutineer said she led a team of three independent scrutineers. Her role was to drive continuous improvement, make recommendations, and provide assurance to partnership on safeguarding.

The Partnership also ensure serious safeguarding reviews are undertaken. A recent project looked at funding of the Metropolitan Police and it was noted that there was concern about the equity and fairness in funding arrangements. Overall, the Lead Scrutineer said the current arrangements were robust, children are safeguarded, and welfare promoted.

The Director of Children's Social Care gave an overview of the role of the Council in multi-agency partnership working. There were a wide range of arrangements in place including the Multi-Agency Partnership HUB (MASH) Practice Forum. The Director also chaired the Early Help Strategic Board and the Domestic Abuse and Violence against Women and Girls Delivery Group.

The Designated Doctor for Children's Safeguarding gave an overview of the role of the designated team. This included dissemination of the Strategy to health colleagues, and supporting rapid reviews and safeguarding issues.

The Director of Safeguarding for North Central London Integrated Care Board added that the annual reports reflected the work undertaken over the last year, but there was also lots of discussion and constructive challenge within the Partnership.

The Detective Chief Inspector (DCI) reported that the Partnership worked well and was well managed. There had been positive outcomes from recent child abuse reviews, and spaces were provided for the local authority to have an input in professional development days.

The DCI reported that, following a Police Inspection in September 2022, there had been causes for concern on reporting children missing. New measures had been put in place to make sure all lines were followed up regarding suspects, and additional training provided for officers on social media investigations. There would be increased staffing from the end of January. They would work at the Child Abuse Assistance Desk and Child Exploitation team.

A Committee Member asked if there had been an increase in police funding to undertake additional work. The DCI reported said there was additional funding to bid for specific tasks, but there had been no increased funding for staffing.

A Committee Member questioned if there was an enhanced response to concerns about children at risk. The DCI said queries were passed to the Missing Team earlier than before.

A Committee Member asked about staffing and specialist skills. The DCI said new staff were bringing additional skills within areas such as county lines. The uplift would lead to extra capacity to do more work including training on social media.

The Chief Executive of BELS said education was a not a statutory safeguarding partner, but reported that they worked closely with the Partnership. There was a responsibility to keep children safe, provide training for teachers, work in partnership between schools and work with Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO). It was reported that one school didn't meet safeguarding requirements and BELS had worked closely with school which was able to achieve a Good Ofsted rating after support.

A Committee Member asked about the number of referrals to the LADO concerning school staff and how it compared to previous years. The Director of Children's Social Care said the LADO produced an annual report which provided details of the how they supported agencies where allegations had been made.

The Executive Director of Children's Services said the annual report of the LADO could be circulated to this Committee.

A Committee Member asked about Child Death Overview Panels detailing unexpected deaths and how figures compare to previous years. The Designated Doctor for Children's Safeguarding said will he didn't have the previous figures to hand, the Barnet statistics had remained similar.

A committee member asked what learning has been ascertained from previous incidents and how effective it has been in preventing more deaths the previous year.

The Executive Director of Children's Services said he reviews the Child Death Overview Panel Annual Report, which covers North Central London. Outcomes from this report will determine what to prioritise in Barnet. The action plan for this year led to the priority of safe sleeping as children were dying of sudden infant death. The Panel previously looked at suicide.

The Safeguarding Partnership Manager said the Child Death Overview Panel lead will attend the Partnership to discuss emerging themes and performance is reported.

A Committee Member asked how year on year changes are captured to ensure there is a reduction in deaths in a specific area. The Executive Director of Children's Services said

they embed systemic change over a period of time. If there were ongoing issues in an area work would continue and would not be ceased to focus on a different priority.

A Committee Member said an area of concern within safeguarding is school absences and asked what happens if a child is taken off school roll – who is responsible for their safeguarding, especially if there are ongoing concerns. The Chief Executive of BELS said schools are responsible for attendance and BELS have attendance officers in the education welfare team. When child leaves the school, it is the local authority's responsibility to track that child until they are settled into a new school setting to ensure the learning from other school is captured.

In response to a further question on responsibilities if a parent decides to home educate their child, it was reported that we have an Elective Home Education Officer who will ensure children get a home education. The Director of Social Care reported that the MASH has a relationship with the Elective Home Education officer and if there are concerns, they will work together to ensure the child is safeguarded at home. There is significant learning around this area.

A Committee Member asked about the upward trend in the referrals to MASH and if data had been compared locally as well as pre-pandemic. Also, what was the impact on staff capacity.

The Director of Children's Social Care said they are comparing data locally as there has been a shift in the level of referrals since the pandemic. Referrals were 13% lower before the pandemic, there had been fewer referrals during lockdown, and partnership working during pandemic had been disrupted. Barnet has the 7th highest in London volume of referrals, but also has a higher child population. Overall 13% become a referral for the safeguarding service.

The department held webinars with partners to refresh their understanding of thresholds and where to report concerns as a result referral numbers are reducing.

A Committee Member asked the lead scrutineer about what areas across children's services need improvement or updating. The Lead Scrutineer said the following areas remained a concern: children suffering from neglect due to cost of living and post pandemic impact; signposting children to the correct services; serious youth violence; post pandemic children's mental health; and the impact of staff shortages such as health visitors, doctors to support children in safeguarding.

A Committee Member asked how young people were selected for the young people's resident survey. The Strategic Lead in Children's Services said an independent research company used a representative sample of secondary school children.

A Committee Member asked how senior leadership understand the grass roots problems given that there is a lot of work going on across Children's Services and many branches across the system.

The Executive Director of Children's Services said there was a range of different things they did including: looking at data; the three independent scrutineers are looking at areas; lessons learnt from inspections; and staffing across the system is an issue. Officers listened to the voice of children and young people, and they recently found that children with disability said their experiences were poorer and they felt more isolated. It was important to have a team and partnership willing to have robust debates, which was

critical to a safe system. Barnet has an open and transparent approach and all needed to work together to ensure children and young people flourish in Barnet.

A Committee Member said as the Children and Young Peoples survey highlighted concerns around knife crime about and what is being done to help young people feel safe. Also, did they know where to go if they are at risk of attack and intimidation. The DCI reported a recent project had been undertaken to reduce crime in Grahame Park which had over 15 shootings. A targeted approach led to seized drugs, weapons and a large number of arrests. This work was achieved in partnership with local authority.

The Director of Children's Social Care said the Safeguarding Board are asked to complete a strategic Needs Assessment and publish a Serious Violence Strategy developed in collaboration with young people. This would be reported to Cabinet for agreement and published by the end of the month. It set out how the Partnership will prevent serious violence.

A Committee Member asked why school exclusions had increased by 28% and what work was being undertaken with schools to deal with this. The Chief Executive of BELS said they were working with schools to prevent permanent exclusions and tackle disproportionality within exclusion. Rates had gone up nationally because of the pandemic as children are finding school environment difficult. Barnet rates were below the national average. Schools worked hard to prevent exclusions and have strategies in place to work with families. The Council has an exclusion lead in the education welfare team who works with schools directly.

A Committee Member asked how much information can be shared and how well this was being done.

The Director of Children's Social Care said there were sharing agreements in place in the MASH but problems still remain as there is a complicated network of different organisations whose systems are were compatible.

RESOLVED that officers be requested to circulate the following reports to the Committee:

- 1. Managing Allegations Against Staff in Barnet – Annual Report by the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) April 2022-March 2023.**
- 2. North Central London Child Death Overview Panel Annual Report Annual Report 2020-21.**

8. CABINET FORWARD PLAN (KEY DECISION SCHEDULE)

The Committee noted the Cabinet Forward Plan (Key Decision Schedule).

The Committee requested that the Corporate Parenting Strategy to be reported to a future meeting.

9. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

RESOLVED that the Committee note the Forward Work Programme.

10. TASK AND FINISH GROUP UPDATE

The Committee considered the Task and Finish Group update report enclosed with the agenda.

Members of the Elective Home Education Task and Finish Group sought clarification that meetings would be held with headteachers and council officers before the review was completed. The Principal Scrutiny Officer confirmed that this would be arranged.

The Committee noted the Task and Finish Group updates.

11. FAMILY SERVICES QUARTERLY UPDATE

The Executive Director of Children's Services gave an overview of the performance data which set out range of information and highlighted that most services remained stable. There was an issue concerning timeliness of assessments which was low but improving. There was continuous improvement in recruitment in the children's workforce.

A Committee Member asked about challenges of completing single assessments and if delays caused any risk to children and questioned why there had been delays.

The Director of Children's Social Care said delays were caused by staffing shortages but noted that this had now been resolved. Data would fluctuate for a period before it stabilised.

A Committee Member asked about the increases in re-registrations for Child Protection Plans. The Director of Children's Social Care said this is being kept under review to ensure that children were not being removed from safeguarding arrangements too early.

A Committee Member noted there were 36 additional unaccompanied asylum seeker children coming to Barnet per month and asked if we could we meet this demand.

The Executive Director of Children's Services said we need to care for our children and meet out statutory duties, there was a concern about children coming into care who were discharged from mental health provision.

A Committee Member asked if the rise in children in care was a national or local trend. The Executive Director of Children's Services said Barnet rates were below the national average. Rises in figures could be caused by isolated local incidents.

The Executive Director of Children's Services said he would look at latest data of numbers of children in care across London and report findings to the Committee.

A Committee Member asked how we were addressing the 18% of Looked After Children who go missing in placement.

The Director of Children's Social said 20 children went missing 54 times. They were often complex adolescents. Young people in care were reported as missing if they come home late. They had return home interviews, risks assessments, and young people were involved in planning. Police would prioritise children at risk of exploitation. There was a regular report to senior leadership teams to ensure there is high level oversight.

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- 1. Note the Family Services self-evaluation and progress as set out in the report.**
- 2. Request that officers provide details of the numbers of children in care across London.**

The meeting finished at 9.00 pm