

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

7 March 2024

Members Present:-

Councillor Giulia Monasterio (Chair)
Councillor Lucy Wakeley (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Joshua Conway
Councillor Anne Hutton
Councillor David Longstaff

Councillor Tony Vourou
Councillor Woodcock-Velleman
Naomi Phillips
Ms Raisel Freedman
Ms Nigel Wildish
Ms Anne O'Shea

Apologies for Absence

Councillor Matthew Perlberg Tamzin Arora

1. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 15th January 2024 were received. Mr Wildish noted that he was at the meeting but not noted as present in the minutes. Subject to this correction the minutes were approved.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the previous meeting were approved as a correct record.

2. ABSENCE OF MEMBERS (IF ANY)

Apologies were received from Ms Tamzin Arora and Cllr Perlberg.

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

None.

4. DISPENSATIONS GRANTED BY THE MONITORING OFFICER

None.

5. PUBLIC COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS (IF ANY)

None.

6. MEMBERS' ITEMS (IF ANY)

None.

7. EDUCATION STANDARDS IN BARNET 2022-23

The Chair introduced Neil Marlow, Chief Executive and Director of Education, Barnet Education and Learning Service (BELS).

The Chief Executive of BELS introduced Barnet pupils (Keiichiro, Yannis, Sebastian, Natalie, Mia, and Harriet) from years 5 and 6 Frith Manor and Trent Primary Schools.

Harriet asked about the purpose and aims of the committee. The Chair explained that the committee exists to challenge decisions made by the council, to function as a critical friend, and to work to ensure that children enjoy growing up in Barnet and that they receive the best education for their future.

A Member asked the pupils what they like best about their school. They responded that they like:

- The range of activities and Widening Horizons every Friday afternoon, as well as the breakfast club and after school club
- Making friends at school and bonding with teachers
- School is very spacious and there are many places to play
- Helping younger classes
- If you are upset you will never be alone

A Member asked whether school helps pupils to learn in ways that are helpful and fun. The pupils responded:

- Science lessons are fun, we do lot of experiments
- Teachers make lessons fun
- We have a forest in our school and we learn a lot there
- Pictures help us to concentrate in maths
- I am dyslexic so they help me to learn and we learn in small groups, using pictures and diagrams to help
- We have space and activities, and learn projects that help us with future careers
- We learn languages and have language ambassadors. French lessons are fun. Some have a French penpal.
- We have a good school lunch with different recipes every day
- We went on residential school trip
- We went to a science centre (the Royal Institute) and learnt about DNA
- Last year we went to the British Museum as part of our study of Greeks. Fun to learn how much more from them we could learn and what they achieved despite not having the resources that we have currently.
- We went to St Paul's cathedral
- I was chosen to go to the Houses of Parliament to receive an award on behalf of our school

Ms Phillips asked how safe the pupils feel at school, and whether when they speak to a grown-up at school about anything they may worry about, they act. The pupils responded:

- In class we have mental health monitors. If you are upset or worried about anything you talk to the monitor about why and they relay it to the teacher who takes care of it. I am a mental health monitor in my school. The teacher brings the pupil outside and we talk privately.
- At Frith Manor we have a Worry Box. You write it down and the teacher takes care of it

A Member asked what they would like to change about their school. The pupils responded:

- More apparatus in PE
- More sports teams and matches.
- More space for people in lower years and different classes. Sometimes classrooms are too small.
- We have a big field but would like to use it more.

The Chair thanked the pupils for their attendance and comments. She asked the pupils to pass on the committee's thanks to their parents and headteachers, for allowing them to join the meeting.

The Chief Executive, BELS introduced his report on Education Standards, which is reported annually to the committee. He introduced guests to the meeting:

- Helen Morrison, Head of School Improvement, BELS
- Anne-Marie Mulkerins Executive Head of Compton School
- Jen Brodtkin, Headteacher, Osidge Primary School
- Tracy Parrot, Senior Curriculum Advisor, BELS Post 16 Team
- Alison Dawes, Director, School Access, Skills and Corporate Services, BELS
- Lauren Jefferson, Education Welfare Officer, BELS
- Helen Cheung – Strategic Lead for EY - Schools
- Monika Ali Chowdhury, Strategic Lead for EY - PVI's and Childminders
- Tina McElligott, Director, Children's Social Care, London Borough of Barnet (LBB)

The Chief Executive, BELS reported that the data in the report covers 2022-23. Data from the Department for Education (DfE) is not released any earlier to bring the information to the committee sooner. Apart from attendance and exclusions data this comprises the finalised data available. Information on looked after children, children in need and children on child protection plans will be released in April..

- Attendance (primary schools) for 2022-23 was 95.15% which is above the England and London figure; 7th best in the country of 152 local authorities
- Attendance (secondary schools) for 2022-23 was 93.51% - above national and London figures and 6th out of all 152 local authorities
- Attendance (special schools) for 2022-23 was 86.47% - 97th out of 152 local authorities.
- Exclusions (primary schools) for the year were low in Barnet but rising, 11th best nationally, and below the London and national average
- Exclusions (secondary schools) for the year – Barnet was 21st out of 152 local authorities

- Exclusions (special schools) for the year – Barnet ranked 72nd out of 152 local authorities.

The Chief Executive, BELS noted that Barnet shows a generally stronger position than the previous year, with low exclusions, high attendance and achievement above national average in nearly all key stages and subjects. There has particularly been a big rise in achievement in Early Years.

The Chief Executive of BELS added that disadvantaged students do well in both primary and secondary schools, and in Barnet their progress outstrips progress non-disadvantaged children nationally. By Key Stage 2 nearly all ethnic groups are above national averages in our Barnet schools, and this continues into Key Stages 4 and 5. In addition outcomes are positive for Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) with Barnet ranking first or second nationally year on year.

A Member asked what is being done to improve special school attendance. The Education Welfare Officer responded that the team has looked at the amount of authorised absence, which is high in special schools, suggesting there may be reasons for the absences. The team would be meeting with headteachers to look at their processes and the reasons given for absences. An action plan would then be put together to try to improve on the number of absences. There may be more valid reasons such as the need for daytime medical appointments. Religious holidays can also be classed both as 'authorised absence' and, in some cases, 'unauthorised' e.g. if extended for longer than the festival days. In addition the parent does not call the school to let them know of their child's absence, or the pupil arrives, after the close of morning register, the absence is classed as unauthorised.

A Member enquired about data on the increase in exclusions in Primary Schools and how far the data is broken down to show reasons. The Director of Schools Access, Skills and Corporate Services in BELS noted that exclusions are broken down into different groups, such as children with complex and difficult needs. In addition since the pandemic a lot of young people have experienced mental health issues or issues with socialisation and routine, and may need support.

The Headteacher, Osidge Primary School noted that there are ongoing pressures with SEN children due to a shortage of school placements. The setting needs to be right, and sometimes schools find this a challenge, given that some more complex SEN pupils are more difficult to manage in a mainstream setting. The Director of School Access, Skills and Corporate Services in BELS noted that the team is currently exploring a potential new site for a new Oakleigh Special School building. The team is working closely with Estates and Corporate Programmes to produce a solution to the need for more school placements.

A Member asked what data are collected around mental health support and outcomes in primary schools. The Chief Executive, BELS noted that the Improvement Team looks at what a school is providing to meet mental health needs and the team also shares good practice. All Barnet schools have a programme for pupils, staff, and parents to support mental health. It is possible that the unauthorised absences increase in secondary schools are due to mental health issues, given the shortage of counsellors, particularly around adolescence. More funding is being directed to training existing staff in schools to support mental health.

The Director of Children's Social Care noted that extra funding has been provided for the Expansion of Schools Mental Health Programme. There are mental health support teams in several, but not all, Barnet Schools but additional funding has been provided for one year. This will be used to develop another two mental health teams for schools in the central part of the Borough where there is Early Help provision and the largest number of schools.

A Member asked whether there are safeguarding concerns in Independent Schools, as a group has been set up to support these schools. The Chief Executive, BELS responded that some Independent Schools are not meeting the required safeguarding standards and they have been written to with a request that they work with the council more closely. The council is planning to set up partnership board like the one that it has with state schools.

A Member asked for information on the attainment of looked after children in Barnet. The Chief Executive, BELS noted that he would share data with the committee when it becomes available and a discussion could be held on this as well as Children in Need, those on a Child Protection Plan and kinship care, with the Virtual School team at a future meeting.

The Executive Director, Children's Services noted that the next meeting of the Children and Education Committee will focus on corporate parenting, so people would be invited to share their experiences. He added that typically educational outcomes before a child is looked after are poor, and it is not possible for schools to make huge improvements if the outcomes are already poor when they enter care, so the same results should not be expected for this cohort. Progress data will be shared with the committee.

A Member noted that students who have English as an Additional Language (EAL) are not mentioned in the results, and the 20-21 census noted that 41% of Barnet residents did not have English as their first language.

The Chief Executive, BELS offered to produce a supplementary report with the data that Barnet has. This shows that for both primary and secondary education, achievement, and progress for children with EAL are good, and that they make more progress than others both countrywide and in Barnet.

The Executive Head of Compton School said that 72 languages are spoken in the school. A range of support is available including the use of AI, with PowerPoint presentations being translated, which has been useful for Ukrainian children and for teachers. Cognitively it is beneficial to have EAL and Barnet is good at supporting these children. Interpreters are invited in for parents to ensure they understand what their child is doing and are aware of the subjects they are selecting.

A Member asked how vocational education could be moved forward in Barnet. The Chief Executive, BELS noted that there is room for improvement, however Barnet has a higher than national percentage progressing onto the 'A' level pathway. The Senior Curriculum Advisor, BELS noted that improvement strategies are being put in place based on the data from summer 2023. Part of this will be raising the profile of the vocational pathway. Some of Barnet's schools are performing very well in vocational education, with above national average achievement and destinations, although unfortunately most students are being taught in schools/colleges with below average achievement in this area. The team is working closely with schools to make progress and is sharing best practice.

A Member recommend that EAL figures be included in educational standards data. The Chief Executive, BELS noted that he would add this to future reports and would send current data following the meeting.

Action: Chief Executive, BELS

Mr Wildish noted that it would be helpful to look at the data on school performance in relation to children in need and children on child protection plans to see whether there are connections. The Executive Director for Children’s Services responded that the data on child protection, children in need and looked after children would become available from the Department for Education at the same time, and national research shows that children in need have the worst outcomes, so the government recently asked local authorities to expand the role of the ‘virtual school’ to include children with a social worker.

The Chair thanked officers for presenting the reports.

The Chief Executive and Director of Education, BELS requested that officers write to the pupils on behalf of the committee to thank them for their attendance.

Action: Principal Scrutiny Officer

RESOLVED that the Committee noted the validated results for school performance in Barnet for the academic year 2022/23.

8. EDUCATION STRATEGIES UPDATE

The Chief Executive of BELS introduced the report and Early Years colleagues:

- Helen Cheung, Strategic Lead for Early Years in Schools, BELS (schools)
- Monika Ali Chowdhury, Strategic Lead for Early Years– PVI and Childminders, BELS

He noted that the data in Appendix A feeds into the School and Settings Improvement Strategy and the Board, to set priorities for the year, and the report in Appendix B provides an update on the Pupil Places Plan.

Ms Cheung stated that the Early Years service focuses on getting things right from birth. She noted that she leads on schools and Ms Chowdhury leads on Private, Voluntary and Independent settings (PVI) and private childminders.

Ms Chowdhury reported that the team works with funded PVIs and that 86% of the 241 PVIs and childminders in Barnet are rated ‘good’ or ‘outstanding. The team provides quality assurance in nurseries, and OFSTED inspection preparation, including carrying out out-of-hours training around OFSTED recommendations. Ms Chowdhury noted that the main challenge is around frequent closure and opening of PVIs.

Ms Cheung reported that achievement in Early Years in Barnet schools has improved from being ranked 83rd nationally to 19th currently. A large package of intense support has been provided by the improvement team.

Ms Chowdhury informed the committee that the current of focus is to continue to work to increase the ranking for the Good Level of Development (GLD) assessment at the end of

Foundation stage, the data used nationally for children's readiness into Key Stage 1. Children are admitted to settings/schools in Barnet from 9 months to 5 years and so the teams work closely with the PVI's and childminders.

Ms Chowdhury continued that there is a complexity of reasons for the outcomes in Early Years and the council is not always in control of this. For example, some children had only been in education for ten months at the point of data collection. Barnet has moved from ranked 83rd to 19th in the country. A big package of intense support has been provided by the improvement team, including partnership working with other groups such as the health visiting team and PVI sector. Efforts have gone into improving the take-up of places for two-year-olds and that the free early years offer is taken up. The team continues to offer voluntary moderation on data for Barnet schools, and there is a lot of training offered, and some work supporting headteachers.

Ms Chowdhury reported that through the data the team is aware that black achievement in the early years could be stronger. Curriculum reviews have been undertaken and currently a project is being run with targeted schools to support black boys in particular, where they are not achieving as well, by providing resources that reflect them.

A Member asked what impact the expansion of free childcare would have on providers, as well as the impact of other things such as settings closing. Ms Chowdhury responded that that some settings are closing but also new ones are opening. The team is doing a lot of work to encourage childminder recruitment, and working to re-instil the passion for early years into the public, trying to maintain morale and upskilling and investing in good staff.

A Member asked how schools could be supported to enable children who will be on an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) to be given this more quickly. Ms Cheung responded that there have been significant increases in the number of SEN children coming through into schools and Barnet has a team to support schools receiving them. There is more work to be done in relation to identification, particularly since lockdown, and the team is continuing to work hard with practitioners.

A Member noted in relation to placement planning and the birth rate in Barnet that papers for another committee recently contradicted the data provided for this meeting. It is unclear whether the birth rate is projected to increase as stated by the GLA. Ms Dawes responded that when planning school places, consideration is given to not only the birth rate data, but also other data which considers movement across and into boroughs, and other factors such as new housing developments.

A Member asked about the timing of reporting to committee given that the School and Settings Improvement Strategy 2023/24 has been presented to them towards the end of the municipal year. The Head of Governance noted that there is a drafting error as the approval of the new Education Strategies would be made at Cabinet in May. This would be picked up for future reports so that they are not presented 'for approval' to scrutiny.

The Chief Executive, BELS noted that the finalised data is not available earlier but some data could be brought earlier in the year if this is required. The Head of Governance noted that the team would speak to officers about the appropriate time for the report to be presented at the committee. In addition the wording would be amended so that the report accurately reflects the role of the committee to "note" the update to the strategies..

Action: Principal Scrutiny Officer

The Chair thanked the officers for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED that the updated School and Settings Improvement Strategy 2023-2024, projected future requirements for school places up to 2026/27, and the progress in delivering sufficient primary, secondary and special school places were noted.

9. CHILD CARE REFORMS UPDATE

The Director of Children's Social Care introduced Deborah Davies, Assistant Head of Service, Early Help, and Andy Whiting, Early Years/Primary Service Manager, to speak on the expansion of child care reforms and the implications for Barnet. Also in attendance was Wendy Wayland, Head of Frith Manor School.

Mr Whiting presented slides which were published with the agenda, describing the vital importance of early years on brain development.

Mr Whiting reported that the Chancellor had announced in the spring budget 2023 that there would be an emphasis on support for working families including 30 hours' free childcare per week for 38 weeks per year, to be rolled out by September 2025. This would be available to 9-month-olds up to reception and parents can check eligibility on the Childcare Choices website.

In addition grants have been introduced for new childminders including a £1200 introduction fee. Those who registered directly with Ofsted would be offered a £600 grant. Barnet has two dedicated members of staff to support Barnet childminders, who have been rolling out information sessions to try to recruit more childminders.

Mr Whiting reported that in Autumn 2023 there has been the biggest uptake of free childcare for disadvantaged children in Barnet – 15 hours' free childcare is still offered. This is based around income and disability living allowance. The disadvantaged offer is for two-year-olds, and all three and four year olds are also entitled to 15 hours' free childcare. The Barnet website has been updated and people are also signposted to Childcare Choices.

Settings which previously had not accepted funded places have been able to do so, due to new hourly rates for providers making this more feasible.

The Headteacher, Frith Manor Primary School reported that the school opened its nursery for two-year-olds with the access to capital funding in 2021. Next month the nursery is offering 24 places due to an increase in demand. The nursery offers many benefits, including early engagement with families and building relationships; providing early help if needed, establishing basic skills, and giving the children early interactions. There has been positive data on the progress the children have made and this has improved their transition from two-year-old to three-year-old nursery.

The Headteacher continued that the nursery has had a positive impact on pupil numbers in the 3-4-year-old nursery, with 52 in the autumn term. Children and families become part of the wider school, and staff can signpost parents to Barnet's offer including speech and language and drop-in centres. It is also easier to identify special needs earlier on. There is a demand for a nursery for 9-month-olds, and the school would like to add this.

A Member asked whether the nursery puts a strain on the resources for the rest of the school. Ms Wayland responded that the nurseries are making a profit and as the school is in deficit, the nursery is a significant help.

A Member asked how communication with parents about availability of nurseries and childminding could be improved, and whether the services have the flexibility that parents are looking for. Mr Whiting responded that there are spaces borough-wide and information is communicated via libraries, children's centres, and health visitors. Also contact is made with parents following every new birth and an information pack is provided. However communication can be reviewed by the team to ensure information is being shared effectively.

A Member noted that item 6 on page 137 of the report is badly written and incoherent, and should be updated for future reports.

The Chair thanked the officers for their report and attendance.

RESOLVED that the committee noted the report.

10. FAMILY SERVICES QUARTERLY UPDATE

The Executive Director for Children's Services presented his report.

A position paper 'Childhood Matters,' a new initiative on talking to future governments on priorities for children and families was circulated.

The Executive Director for Children's Services noted that an update on all current national policy changes have been included in the papers. There is a requirement for a new national Kinship Strategy and a new Children's Social Care and Digital Strategy. Barnet is supporting this through work commissioned by the government, to make sure the right data is being collected and used effectively for planning services.

The Executive Director for Children's Services reported that there is new guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' and Barnet is looking into how to implement this. The Safeguarding Partnership arrangements have been amended and would be in place by the time the new guidance is required.

A new National Framework and Dashboard for Children's Social Care has been implemented and there is a national review of findings on children with disabilities and complex health needs.

The Executive Director for Children's Services added that an update on the Children's Secure Home in London is included in the report.

Details are provided on a visit from the Minister of Loneliness to the Care Leaver's Hub, and a visit from the Ministry of Justice to Jona House.

The report also provides an update of performance across family services, sets out some of the data and highlights areas and actions that are being taken.

The Executive Director for Children's Services noted that the committee had asked to see compliments and complaints received by the service, and this is included in the papers at Appendix 3. Publishing this is also a statutory requirement. A Member congratulated officers for their hard work in responding so well to residents' needs.

He added that an update on workforce issues is included in the report.

A Member commended the team for the positive direction on social workers and asked whether they would continue with this work to try to make this successful or whether they would prioritise other areas. The Executive Director for Children's Services noted that new social work apprentices have joined Barnet and his view is that it is better to develop staff from within the organisation and retain them.

The Director for Children's Social Care reported that Barnet's retention rate for students who have converted to newly qualified social workers is 70-80%, and they stay through an assessed and supported year of practice and into the longer term. Around 75% of social workers who qualified three years ago have done this.

A Member commended officers' work in turning around some of the outcomes with looked after children, for example dental checks for these children have increased over the past year, as detailed in the Children's services Analysis Tool (ChAT). The Executive Director for Children's Services noted that the aim is to move away from poorer performance in all areas in line with the success with increasing dental checks.

RESOLVED that the committee noted the reports.

11. CABINET FORWARD PLAN (KEY DECISION SCHEDULE)

The Head of Governance noted that the Cabinet Forward Plan is included so that the committee can consider whether there is anything within its remit that it is interested in looking at prior to Cabinet deciding.

RESOLVED that the committee noted the Cabinet Forward Plan.

12. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Head of Governance reported that a public consultation has been published on the Engage Barnet website asking for items that residents would like scrutiny to consider. The political groups have also been asked for their input. Following a prioritisation process the 2024-25 Work Programme would be produced in time for the next meeting.

13. ANY ITEM(S) THE CHAIR DECIDES ARE URGENT

None.

14. ANY OTHER EXEMPT ITEM(S) THE CHAIRMAN DECIDES ARE URGENT

None.

The meeting finished at 9.18 pm