

MINUTES OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 8 March 2023
(7:00 - 9:02 pm)

Present: Cllr Glenda Paddle (Chair), Cllr Dorothy Akwaboah (Deputy Chair), Cllr Andrew Achilleos, Cllr Fatuma Nalule, Cllr Paul Robinson, Cllr Muazzam Sandhu, Cllr Phil Waker and Cllr Mukhtar Yusuf; Sajjad Ali

Also Present: Cllr Jane Jones and Cllr Maureen Worby

Apologies: Cllr Donna Lumsden, Cllr Ingrid Robinson, Glenda Spencer, Sarfraz Akram and Richard Hopkins

31. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

32. Minutes - To confirm as correct the minutes of the meeting held on 24 January 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 January 2023 were confirmed as correct.

33. Minutes - To confirm as correct the minutes of the meeting held on 8 February 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 February 2023 were confirmed as correct.

34. OFSTED Inspection Readiness: Update Report

The Commissioning Director for Care and Support (CDCS) delivered an update on the Council's Children's Social Care OFSTED Inspection Readiness. This detailed:

- The OFSTED Inspection process, the Council's own Self-Evaluation which set out its plans and areas for priority improvement for the forthcoming 12-month period, and annual engagement meetings between the Council and OFSTED to discuss these.
- The continuous journey of improvement that Children's Social Care had undergone since the Council's last full OFSTED inspection, as well as the two focused assurance visits from OFSTED that had also been undertaken in this intervening period.
- The current context and landscape against which recent improvement activity had taken place, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis and local challenges such as increased population growth, which had exacerbated pressures within Children's Social Care.
- The position of Children's Social Care within Barking and Dagenham, such as an improvement in the quality of the majority of cases and a positive workforce morale.
- Areas for future improvement, such as consistency in the quality of services (for example, due to increased demand); however, this was improving as

caseloads had been reducing steadily over the last six months.

- Further challenges within Children's Social Care, such as a lack of children in care placements to meet national demand and increased complexity of cases;
- Whilst OFSTED had previously rated the service as 'requires improvement' in 2019, with a number of the categories coming close to 'inadequate', many of the categories were now close to being ranked as 'good', with some likely to be rated as such, due to the improvement work that had taken place. These improvements were not to be underestimated, with the past four years having been very challenging due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Whilst local authorities were unaware of when they would receive a visit from OFSTED, the Council continuously worked to ensure that it would be ready whenever this occurred.

In response to questions from Members, the CDCS stated that:

- It was essential that the Council's Self-Assessment was a realistic portrayal of its current social care position and that it focused on future improvement efforts.
- Early Help services did form a small part of the inspection, as part of the 'Health and Protection' section. The commissioning of the Independent Review of this service when it was located elsewhere in the Council had led to a number of improvements within it, with various aspects of the service now likely to be described as 'good'. Whilst more work was to be undertaken, the service was working to reduce pressures within Children's Social Care and to provide a safe pathway out of this service as risk de-escalated.
- Increased migration into the Borough was responsible for increased service demand; the demand on both Adults' and Children's social care services was increasing broadly proportionately to the growth of the population. The Council needed to continuously consider how it would meet increasingly challenging financial pressures, such as increases in the costs of buying the services that residents needed and balancing this with good quality and consistent practice that was safe and secure.
- Whilst recruitment and retention were a challenge, the Council had worked extensively around these. During the 2019 OFSTED Inspection, certain parts of Children's Social Care were operating with around 45-50% agency staff, with the Assessment service operating at 70% agency staff. Through targeted work, the agency rates within Children's Social Care had reduced to around 15% during the pandemic, which had been largely maintained and were providing a more stable workforce. These agency rates were now starting to increase slightly, with the Leadership team and HR revisiting these through its Workforce Development Strategy.
- The Council was looking at its recruitment package, which looked in part to ensure that its social workers' pay was competitive, as well as the professional development, support and training offer that the Council could provide, with an extensive Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme already in place for Children's Social Care workers. There were

a number of key aspects as to how the Council was working to develop the programme, such as through working with the Council's Learning and Development team as well as colleagues at the Barking, Havering and Redbridge Workforce Academy. A programme of work was also being undertaken with Coventry and Birkbeck Universities, to sponsor the development of the Council's own social work professionals. The Council had opened up 18 family support work apprenticeships, to develop its future workforce and was engaging in recruitment campaigns in South Africa and Canada, where there were similar standards of Social Work degrees that were compatible with working in the United Kingdom, to attract further high quality and experienced social workers and managers. The Council was also considering potential key worker housing offers to continue to attract social workers into the Borough, as well as the potential for financial incentives, which needed to be further discussed and worked through.

- Social Work England had provided clear reasoning as to why individuals were being driven away from social work as a profession, such as social work having the second lowest pay growth of any profession in the UK over the past ten years. Rising caseloads had also exacerbated pressures within Children's Social Care, which had been compounded by reductions in operating budgets for councils to deliver services over the past ten years; many social workers had chosen to leave the profession for their own wellbeing due to these pressures. As such, a large part of the Council's Retention Strategy would need to centre around how it supported its social workers to cope with these pressures, their wellbeing and their development. A further contributing factor to the numbers of social workers leaving the profession was around the negative perceptions associated with the job; whilst failures were largely due to issues within the system, social workers were often publicly scapegoated when issues arose. Many social workers had also returned to their home countries as a result of the pandemic.
- The Council needed to be more innovative in terms of creating the placements that were needed for its children, such as through increased collaborative working with other local authorities and the Voluntary and Community Sector, to generate increased supply of provision.
- The Council had a comprehensive quality assurance function, whose sole job was to continuously check quality in practice, such as through monthly audits and randomly sampled casework. The Council also had Independent Reviewing Officers and Child Protection Conference chairs that were independent and whose job was to maintain oversight of the most vulnerable young people and those at greatest risk. There was also a stable and strong management structure in the service, who had a real time and very close view of casework, gaps and issues.
- In the interests of time and in response to a question around the steps that the Council was taking to address the financial challenges faced by Children's Social Care, especially in light of the Council's overall financial positioning and increased demand, the CDCS would provide a detailed written response following the meeting.

A Councillor also wished to put on record the importance of having familiar figures

in care leavers lives, as well as building trust between social workers and young people to achieve better outcomes.

In response to questions from the Parent Governor Primary Co-optee, the CDCS stated that:

- There would be a separate joint OFSTED and CQC inspection regime for services for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The inspection would assess the local area as opposed to solely the local authority, and would also involve Health and other partners. The Council expected this inspection to occur in late 2023 or early 2024. A separate Self-Evaluation for SEND was currently being finalised.
- In terms of early help allocation times, the allocation timeliness figure of 70% within ten working days, was based on the Council's Self-Evaluation data from October 2022. The Council had been implementing its Target Operating Model and had since finished recruiting more employees as part of this to cope with the number of cases, meaning that positively, the allocation timeliness figure was now in excess of 90%.
- Flexible working opportunities for social workers was part of the package for recruitment. Whilst there was a limit as to how far this could be used, as frontline practice required working face-to-face with children and their families, there was a balance to this and social workers could make the most of these flexible working opportunities where it was possible to do so.

In response to questions from the Barking and Dagenham Youth Forum co-optees, the CDCS stated that:

- In terms of strengthening Adolescent services, whilst there was lots of positive work going on across the service, this was neither well-joined nor part of a consistent offer, which was partly due to a recurrent lack of funding. In improving the services, the Council was looking to rebuild these "from the ground up", driven by the ideas and perspectives of young people. The Council was looking to start this work within the next few months, in discussions with young people. This would also involve considering how social workers, Child Protection chairs and the Independent Reviewing Officers could work differently to support these services.
- The CDCS would work with the Head of Engagement Opportunity and Wellbeing Commissioning to attend a future session of the Barking and Dagenham Youth Forum to explore further questions around adolescent services, services for care leavers, measures to prevent young people from being exploited in care, and how the Council incorporated children's voices into services, in more depth. At these sessions, he would also be able to answer any other questions from the other Barking and Dagenham Youth Forum members.

35. Pre-Scrutiny Briefing: CQC Inspection

The Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health Integration (CM) delivered an update on the Care Quality Commission (CQC Inspection). This was a new national inspection regime, with the CQC looking to begin its inspections of Adult

Social Care Services from April 2023. The CM stated that:

- The CQC planned to inspect 20 local authorities between April and September 2023.
- New guidance as to the inspection framework was currently being published on a weekly basis, which was creating uncertainty in terms of how the CQC would be ready to begin its inspections from April;
- The CQC would be assessing how the Council met its obligations under the Care Act; as such, it was not just assessing Adult Social Care services, but also those of departments such as Housing, Community Solutions, Employment and Public Health.
- The CQC would also be assessing how local authorities worked alongside their respective Integrated Care System (ICS) partners, which was creating uncertainty in terms of how the CQC would inspect those authorities that belonged to larger ICS arrangements, such as Barking and Dagenham.
- Current guidance stated that the CQC would focus on four areas as part of its inspections (working with people, providing support, ensuring safety and leadership) and would be based on how local authorities could deliver against specified quality statements.
- A project group was currently in place to consider current practices and to complete the Council's Self-Evaluation for Adult Social Care.
- The Council had also commissioned some independent reviews, where it was aware that there were potential issues in services; the Local Government Association (LGA) was currently reviewing the Council's safeguarding pathway, which could create some challenges around the interface between Community Solutions and Adult Social Care, and the positioning of the Intake team within Community Solutions currently.
- The Council would also need to look at aspects such as providing assurance around services, despite historical underinvestment, as well as further develop its joint working practices.
- The CM and the CDCS would present further reports to the Committee, following the completion of the Council's Self-Evaluation, once they had received the outcomes of the independent reviews and following more information around the CQC inspection process.

In response to questions from Members, the CM stated that:

- Wording within the Health and Care Act 2022 meant that the CQC was able to both intervene and support local authorities through their inspections, which was likely included to enable the CQC to act however it felt that it needed to do so, in order to improve local services.
- When the report talked about preventing social care, this related to shifting the Council's resources and focusing its efforts to ensure that services were provided to residents at an earlier date, such as through additional support in their homes or through Voluntary sector support, so that people did not progress to statutory social care services.
- The latest part of the framework had only been published as of the week commencing 6 March 2023. Whilst local authorities had now received the 'I statements' that would be used as part of the assessments, as well as the

principles of the framework, there were still more components of the guidance that needed to be released. This was creating concern, as the CQC was due to start inspecting local authorities from April 2023.

- The CQC had not provided a timescale for which they would give their ratings.
- The CQC would not be assessing Children's Social Care as part of its upcoming inspections.

The Committee expressed its concerns at the lack of reference points and benchmarking that were available to local authorities as part of the inspection process, as well as its fears that the CQC was not sufficiently prepared to begin its inspections from April and the implications that this could have for the first 20 local authorities to be inspected in particular. It was also concerned about how these inspections would affect already stretched and underfunded councils across the country.

36. Work Programme

The Chair informed the Committee of the following changes that had been made to the Work Programme since the last meeting, which were agreed by the Committee:

- An item on the Metropolitan Police Turnaround Plan 2023-25 was now proposed to be added to the April 2023 meeting. In order to accommodate the Borough Commander's diary, the Committee would be moved from the current 5 April date, to the 4 April, in order to enable him to attend to present this item. It was proposed that the Flytipping and Parks items currently scheduled for this agenda would be rescheduled to a date within the new municipal year, to accommodate this addition.
- An item on the vision for the Council's new Corporate Plan was now proposed to be added to the 4 April 2023 meeting, following a request from the Leader for the Committee to hear this item.
- The Barking & Dagenham Traded Partnership: Repairs & Maintenance item that had been due to be presented to the meeting scheduled for 8 March 2023, was now proposed to be presented at the 10 May 2023 meeting. This was due to several changes in personnel and a further deep dive undertaken on the overall repairs position, the results of which the report authors wished to include in the update to the Committee.
- The Self-referral to the Regulator of Social Housing item that was due to be presented to the meeting scheduled for 5 April 2023, was now proposed to be presented at the 10 May 2023 meeting, to compliment the Barking & Dagenham Traded Partnership: Repairs & Maintenance item.
- The Update: Quality of schools' recovery post Covid-19; Update: How are we incorporating Race & Social Justice work into our schools' education programmes?; and Readiness for inspection of services to support children/young people with SEND items that were due to be presented to the meeting scheduled for 10 May 2023, were now proposed to be presented at the 7 June 2023 meeting, to accommodate changes in the May schedule.
- The Housing for Vulnerable Groups item that was due to be presented to

the meeting scheduled for 7 June 2023, would now be rescheduled to a date within the new municipal year.