

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CHILDREN & LEARNING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE
VIRTUAL MEETING
20 January 2022 (8.03 pm)**

Present: Councillors Judith Holt (Chairman), Carol Smith,
Gillian Ford and Reg Whitney

Co-opted Members:

Church Representatives:

Mr Jack How and Lynne Bennett

Non-voting Member: Ian Rusha

71 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Robby Misir, Councillor Sally Miller BCAC, Councillor Tele Lawal, Robert South (Director of Children's Services), and Julie Lamb (Co-opted Member).

72 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interest received at the meeting.

73 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman advised that, in line with current Government guidance, the meeting was being held on a remote basis only and asked everyone to please be patient in case of any issues with the technology. Everyone was asked to ensure their correct name was being displayed on their Zoom screen.

74 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2021 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

75 CHILDREN'S SERVICES ANNUAL COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS REPORT 2020-21

The Sub-Committee received a report on the Children's Services Annual Complaints and Compliments Report 2021-21.

The report provided the Committee with an update on the Children's Services Annual Complaints and Compliments Report for 2020–21. Appendix 1, set out Children's Services statutory complaints and compliments received during the period, as well as Members' correspondence.

Local authorities had a statutory requirement to set up a complaints process which was set out in section 26 Children Act 1989 and the Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006 and were required to publish an Annual Report.

The report highlighted areas of performance and potential areas for improvement.

Complaints in 2020-21 had increased by 9% (87) compared to 2019-20 (80). The number of enquiries had increased significantly in 2020-21 compared to 2019-20, by 46%. There continued to be a steady number of complaints escalating to Stage 2 investigations in 2020-21 (6) and was at the same level as in 2019-20. There was one complaint escalated to stage 3 which was escalated to the Ombudsman.

There was a significant increase (36%) in the number of complaints received by Triage/MASH & Assessment in 2020-21 compared to 2019-20. A small increase in the number of complaints to Care Resources, and a decrease for Intervention & Support Services, with 'standard of service' being the highest reason.

The increase in complaints received by Triage/MASH & Assessment were primarily linked to allegations around child contact arrangements and concerns around domestic abuse. The number of contacts received by the service in this category in 2020-21 had more than doubled in comparison in 2019-20, and in line with national trends.

In 2020-21 complaints regarding 'attitude/behaviour of staff' decreased significantly by 50%. As a result of improved recording an ongoing practice developed. However complaints around 'standard of service' had doubled in 2020-21, with significant increase also in 'inaccurate information'.

Throughout 2020-21, demand for children's services increased and continued in the current financial year. The number of contacts received in 2020-21 was at its highest level since 2017/18, and the number of children entering care was at its highest level since 2016/17.

The number of complaints upheld and partially upheld accounted for 39% (6) and (28) respectively of the total complaints. Those upheld or partially upheld resulted in an apology, linked to the need to provide explanation or further information about the reasons for intervention or particular parts of the process that initially may not have been clear. How information was given, and the consistency should be explored. Ombudsman

recommendations were actioned with refresher training commissioned for safeguarding that ensured practitioners adhered to procedures.

Response times had improved in 2020-21 with 31% (27) responded to within the 10 working day timeframe. Efforts would continue to improve response times, while recognising the increased complexities of cases and balancing the priorities of the service. Complaints continued to be received by email (57) and a further 18 received online.

The cost of independent investigations decreased significantly in 2020-21, due to the withdrawal of three Stage 2 escalations, reducing the cost to £6,087.95 from £19,531.65 in 2019-20.

Monitoring information was based on the child(ren) within the family unit in which a complaint was made. There were increases across age groups, 0-5-, 10-24 and 15-17, the highest increase was in the age group of 0-5. Male children were higher across all age groups except 6-9. Children recorded with a disability was low across all ages, and diagnosed with mainly Autism or Aspergers Syndrome. 'White British' children highest representation and reflects the borough's population make up with 'Caribbean' and 'Any other Mixed Background' increasing in 2020-21. Complainants declaring no faith significantly increased in 2020/21(49), compared to 2019-21(6). 'Catholic and 'Christian' faiths showed a slight increase in 2020-21.

The number of compliments received in 2020-21 were lower than preferred (22); however, showed an improvement from 2019-20 (3). Continued efforts to encourage staff within Children's Services to share compliments so these could be logged to reflect more accurately the good work being done.

The Complaints and Compliments action plan had been refreshed and would be monitored at quarterly meetings between the Social Care Complaints and Information Team, and the Children's Services Senior Management Team.

Questions arose from why the various Christian/Catholic categories within the report appeared to be variations of the same thing. Officers confirmed they would enquire about the categories but thought it was likely due to the way people identified on the forms. It was also queried whether multiple complaints were logged on the same day and whether multiple complaints by the same complainant were contained in the report. Officers confirmed that multiple complaints including on the same day and from the same complainants were logged and were included in the data presented.

The Sub-Committee noted the report.

The Sub-Committee received a report that provided a further update on the report presented at the November 2021, Children and Learning Overview & Scrutiny sub-committee meeting.

The report contained the adaptations schools made to both the content of their curriculum and most notably to the delivery of the curriculum in response to the impact of COVID-19. The report had now included an update on the specific impact on pupils with special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and more-able pupils.

It was reported that the impact on children with SEND had been significant. Schools were required to be flexible in their approach to remote learning when it was necessary, and there had been many examples of providing homework packs tailored to individual children's needs.

Schools, particularly the special schools, had supported families with outreach work, provided support to the whole family and lent equipment for use at home, delivering activities, and even shopped particularly at the height of the pandemic.

Impact on staffing levels due to COVID illness amongst staff was significant. Vaccine uptake was good. However, staffing levels and need for self-isolation continued to affect the levels of attendance at school.

Schools had received support from the Local Authority consisting of health and wellbeing training and managing anxieties. The Educational Psychology service ran a parent helpline and regular support for SENDCos had been provided individually and through borough wide SENDco forums, to answer questions, share good practice to support school in maintaining their offer to children with SEND.

Schools included pupils with SEND in all their welfare call and welfare visits, enabling additional pastoral support to be provided where necessary. It was nationally documented that pupils with SEND or additional needs fell further behind in many cases during the pandemic, and (anecdotal) evidence from schools suggested that this was also true for Havering schools. This was due to both lower online/face-to-face attendance rates than others, and often they were in families that are more economically challenged, resulting in parents struggling to provide the support for home learning. There were often issues such as sharing technology with siblings, and schools worked very hard to mitigate those factors, as evidenced in the previous report.

It was also noted that pupils with SEND and other vulnerabilities were often slower to return to school following the various periods of lockdown and remote learning. In this initial 'recovery' phase, schools put on additional intervention groups to attempt to make up for lost ground where pupils had fallen behind. Many of the pupils with SEND and other vulnerable pupils were included in these interventions as schools focused their resources on pupils who were significantly below age-expected norms.

In terms of the more-able Pupils, no specific enquiries were made into the impact on their learning. However, many schools provided a core curriculum and additional challenges which would have enabled more-able pupils to take subjects and topics further. Take up was variable and not completely restricted to more-able pupils.

Schools reported, particularly in secondary schools, that some pupils, particularly boys, had related very well to the flexibility of remote learning and did well, making good progress, and in a small number of cases likely better than usual progress. More-able pupils generally had better remote learning attendance, and better work completion rates (as perhaps might have been predictable), therefore would have suffered less loss of learning.

Attendance rates/completion rates varied across schools, and the methods used for accounting these varied, as previously reported, and there was no awareness of any national/regional benchmarking for any of this.

Queries were raised regarding respite care, foster carer retention and recruitment. Officers confirmed that respite had gone back to pre-pandemic levels. There was an increased demand for foster carers and provisions had returned with an increased capacity. In turn, the increase in the assessment process would grow the market further.

Questions and concern were raised around the technology deficient for SEND pupils and what would happen in the future. Officers suggested that due to the government response of providing laptops etc. to schools during the pandemic many were now better equipped with technology. The situation was being monitored and special needs requirements would be specifically considered. Modelling and working with other authorities to increase academy performance and self-improvement would also be pursued. Letters were currently being drafted regarding this topic and would be sent to all school head teachers.

The Sub-Committee noted the report.

Chairman