

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES

19 SEPTEMBER 2017

- Chair:** * Councillor Phillip O'Dell
- Councillors:** * Michael Borio (4) * Kairul Kareema Marikar (5)
* Jo Dooley * Jerry Miles
* Ameet Jogia * Chris Mote
* Barry Macleod-Cullinane (3) * Stephen Wright (1)
- Voting Co-opted:** (Voluntary Aided) (Parent Governors)
* Mr N Ransley
Reverend P Reece
- Non-voting Co-opted:** * Harrow Youth Parliament Representative
- In attendance:** Councillor Mrs Christine Robson

- * Denotes Member present
(1), (3), (4) and (5) Denote category of Reserve Members
† Denotes apologies received

231. Attendance by Reserve Members

RESOLVED: To note the attendance at this meeting of the following duly appointed Reserve Members:-

Ordinary Member

Councillor Richard Almond
Councillor Ms Pamela Fitzpatrick
Councillor Barry Kendler
Councillor Paul Osborn

Reserve Member

Councillor Stephen Wright
Councillor Michael Borio
Councillor Kairul Kareema Marikar
Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane

232. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that no declarations were made by Members of the Committee.

233. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meetings held on 27 June and 17 July 2017 be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

234. Public Questions and Petitions

RESOLVED: To note that no public questions or petitions were received at this meeting.

235. References from Council/Cabinet

There were none.

RESOLVED ITEMS

236. Youth Justice Partnership Plan 2017-18

The Committee received a report on the Council's draft Youth Justice Partnership Plan for 2017-18. The Divisional Director, Children and Young People introduced the report commending those who had worked to produce the draft plan and to achieve improvements in the service such that the "priority rating" of the Youth Offending Team had now been withdrawn. He apologised to the Committee for the late circulation of a further version of the plan which contained certain minor amendments. He established the context of the draft plan, including various relevant reviews of youth justice such as those conducted by Charlie Taylor, David Lammy and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MoPAC). The officer reported that the plan included proposals made by the Youth Justice Board and was aligned with the Community Safety, Violence, Vulnerability and Exploitation Strategy; the intention was to bring together a more coordinated "youth offer" for local young people. The officer confirmed that the staffing position had developed with fully permanent appointments and a good skills mix in place; he considered that there was now an effective "triage" system diverting young people away from behaviours likely to put them at risk of entering the youth justice system.

In response to a Member's query about crime levels, the officer confirmed that while overall levels were down, there were increases in certain crimes and in the severity and seriousness of some of these; for example, there had been an increase in the use of knives. So while there had been success in reducing first time entrants to the youth justice system, the seriousness and impact of violent crimes was a real area of concern.

A Member considered that the plan contained too much detail in certain parts and did not adequately highlight the key issues; he gave the example of the

section on “Out of Court Disposals” (Page 18 of the plan) as being unclear as to the trend compared to previous periods.

The representative of the Harrow Youth Parliament considered that there was room for improvement in the “youth offer” as part of the Early Support Service, particularly in relation to activities and initiatives to develop self-confidence in young people. His view was that the current offer did not go far enough in addressing these needs and he proposed that the Council should do further work with relevant voluntary organisations in this area. An officer reported that such opportunities were available in existing programmes although they tended not to be overtly labelled as “self-confidence” sessions since this was likely to deter young people. Instead, the relevant skills and approaches were included in sessions on such subjects as creative writing, drama and even cookery; there were also classes on presentation skills. It was intended that these programmes would continue with the involvement of groups such as Ignite.

A Member raised concerns about street crime in South Harrow, particularly incidents involving knives. The Divisional Director, Children and Young People confirmed that knife crime was a top priority for multi-agency work on crime reduction and prevention; this reflected the seriousness of its impact on victims and their families. The Council and local Police had made representations to the MoPAC about improved cross-border work to address individuals and groups involved in incidents outside their own boroughs of residence. It was hoped that this would lead to increased resources for this work.

A Member felt that the analysis of local crime trends did not readily equip councillors to make decisions about the appropriate allocation of resources, nor to evaluate the degree of success of the Council’s programmes. The Divisional Director, Children and Young People conceded that it was very difficult to understand the reasons for crime trends; however, he referred to the development of “problem profiles” making use of data drawn from a wide range of sources, including the YOT, Police and Early Support Hubs. He gave the example of the Council assisting the Police to shut down the operations of one gang in Wealdstone. An officer added that the causes of crime were complex and difficult to understand fully; the factors included levels of education, family life changes and housing conditions. Nevertheless, these could mislead, an example being the increase in the incidence of certain crimes locally even in a period of reducing deprivation.

A Member suggested that the Council’s regeneration strategy should address the implications for youth crime; for example, how Wealdstone town centre would be affected in this respect. The Divisional Director, Children and Young People confirmed this was being addressed in one of the strategy workstreams, though the work was in its infancy. Consultation with young people would be part of this project. The Corporate Director, People Services cautioned that this particular report to the Committee was solely about the Youth Justice Partnership Plan, much of which was constrained by the requirements of the youth Justice Board; its focus would be diluted by extending its range to cover other areas such as the regeneration programme. He underlined that preventative work was a significant part of the plan.

A Member proposed that the Council should make arrangements for young people who had been victims and perpetrators of knife crime to become involved in preventative programmes as this approach was much more likely to influence others. An officer confirmed that young people with such involvement in crime were invited to explain the impact of the crimes on them to audiences of school pupils and other young people. This type of work was supplemented by an annual viewpoint survey of young people to inform the development of services.

The Harrow Youth Parliament representative was concerned about the apparent reduction in the drama programme during the summer and about the infrequency of other related sessions which were often held at times of the day which were inconvenient for some young people. He acknowledged that the programme included much good work, but he considered that there was considerable scope to improve provision. He referred to the indications in Table 13 of the draft plan that there were more vulnerable young people and, in this context, he was concerned that the opportunities for one-to-one mentoring had been removed. The Corporate Director, People Services underlined that the YOT did not provide a universal service; it was a targeted provision operating within budget constraints and pressures, and it was therefore difficult to do more. He acknowledged the points made by the Harrow Youth Parliament, which he had noted in many other forums and meetings, but the Council could not keep repeating its explanations of the reasons behind the reorganisation of the services.

The Harrow Youth Parliament representative considered that the Council could do more to use data available on young people exiting the criminal justice system to offer a more customised and targeted service. An officer advised that while there was no specific mentoring scheme in place, staff were engaged in coaching and advising young people who had been involved in and affected by crime.

A Member asked about the following aspects of the plan: the extent of the IT challenges, the timing of the equalities impact assessment, the need to strengthen the references to preventative work and to joint work with MoPAC on knife crime involving young people. An officer acknowledged the difficulties which had been experienced with the new IT system and confirmed that work continued to improve performance; there had been further investment in both infrastructure and software. The Divisional Director, Children and Young People reported that the equalities impact assessment was very nearly ready to circulate to Members; it was the first time that such an assessment had been conducted for the youth justice partnership plan. The assessment would be included in the documents submitted to the Cabinet when considering the plan. The principal equalities issue was the over-representation of people from BME communities in the criminal justice system.

RESOLVED: That the draft Youth Justice Plan 2017-18 be noted and that the Committee's consideration of it be reported to the Cabinet which will then report to full Council for formal adoption of the plan.

237. Ofsted Inspection - Action Plan

The Committee received a report which outlined progress with the Council's response to the Ofsted Inspection report on Children's Services issued in February 2017. The Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People & Schools expressed her satisfaction at the outcome of the Ofsted inspection, but she underlined the importance of the action plan to address those limited areas where the inspectors had recommended improvements.

The Corporate Director, People Services confirmed that Harrow was in the 25% of local authorities in the country judged as "good" by Ofsted and that there were only a couple of authorities in a higher category. He tabled a chart of the results of the Ofsted inspections of London Borough councils to demonstrate Harrow's performance.

An officer outlined the key messages from the inspection report, in particular the strong political and corporate leadership. He cited one member of the inspection team as having said it was "self-evident that children are everyone's priorities". The inspection had highlighted strengths in terms of the quality of children's social work, the swift and effective legal processes to protect vulnerable children, the integration of relevant policies and themes such as work on child sexual exploitation, radicalisation, etc, arrangements for the education of children in care, and the recruitment and retention of social workers. The inspectors had also commended the quality of training and supervision of staff, the strong relationships between social workers and the children and young people they worked with, and the relationships with key partner agencies. The action plan contained ten recommendations and there was already good progress against each of these.

In response to a Member's query about the recruitment of social workers, the officer underlined the importance of continuity and stability in the support given to vulnerable children and their families. In this regard, retention of good quality staff was a priority for the service as was the recruitment of such staff when vacancies occurred. The service was moving from the use of agency staff with the proportion of them having reduced from 30% to 20%. A growth bid had been submitted in the previous financial to support improved recruitment and retention.

In response to another Member's query about improvements proposed as a result of the inspection, the officer explained that some had been the result of the timing of the inspection. For example, a reorganisation of Early Support Services had been taking place at the time of the inspection and changes had been implemented since; this involved the alignment of the service with Children's Centres and the emerging new youth offer. Higher than usual levels of activity in children's centres had been noted during August and referrals were now more prompt and effective.

A Member asked about work tackling radicalisation among children and young people, and in particular, whether this included work with youth organisations. The Divisional Director, Children and Young People, reported that the Council had received some additional funding for work with schools and youth organisations like Wish and Synergy were also involved in this. He accepted that this was an area in which the Council could improve. The number of

young people identified as vulnerable to or involved in radicalisation, was small; he would send more specific information about this to members of the Committee.

The Chair asked about the attendance of relevant agencies at review meetings for children at risk, in particular how it could be strengthened. An officer explained that “Section 47” child protection investigations were conducted through the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) which, by definition, involved a range of agencies; this cooperation took place through day-to-day work in discussions of cases and information-sharing. This liaison work was improving with growing cooperation and participation.

A Member queried the real position of progress against the action plan when a number of items were subject to actions to be completed “by the end of September 2017”; he asked for written confirmation of progress on these items. He considered that it would have been easier for Members to monitor progress if the items had been analysed by more discrete and specific tasks; also the format of the action plan, with a narrow column for the largest amount of information on progress, was not effective. He gave the example of Recommendation 4 which related to Paragraph 100 of the inspection report yet, in his view, did not adequately address the issues raised in that paragraph. An officer reported that there were five recommendations on which progress had been judged as “green” and the remaining five were considered to be “amber”; he was pleased with this progress.

The Harrow Youth Parliament representative pointed to the reference, in the response to Recommendation 1, to “Youth Led Needs Analysis” being undertaken with regard to early support services and the ambition that families would not be subjected to unnecessary assessment procedures. He sought assurances that there would be safeguards. An officer confirmed that there would be early identification of needs through the MASH with appropriate passporting to the Early Support Hub. The needs of the individual and/or family would be reviewed against the early support offer.

The Harrow Youth Parliament representative considered that Recommendation 10 related to the involvement of young people in scrutiny and he proposed that there should be more opportunities to engage in the work of scrutiny review panels. The Chair indicated he would welcome increased involvement of young people in relevant reviews. He considered that this would be a positive contribution to the scrutiny work programme particularly in view of the helpfulness of the Harrow Youth Parliament.

A Member asked for clarification of the start date of the revised early support service and as to whether the inspection had delayed implementation. The Divisional Director, Children and Young People reported that the three hubs were in operation and available data now demonstrated a significant increase in numbers involved and improvement in outcomes. There was still work to be done embedding the service, including the drawing together of the youth offer and the Youth Offending Team. The Corporate Director, People Services underlined that the inspection judgement of the service was based on assessment of the plans for its reorganisation.

The Chair suggested that scrutiny leads could be kept informed of progress on implementation of the action at their regular briefings meetings and they could then ensure that the Scrutiny Leadership Group was updated. Should there be any concerns about progress, then these Members could decide whether a report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was warranted, though this should be by exception only.

Referring to response to Recommendation 4, the Harrow Youth Parliament representative asked for clarification about the “key agencies” involved in Section 47 investigations. An officer advised that as many as 21 different types of organisation were involved, principally in the fields of education and health, and including public, private and third sector agencies. It was made clear that actual attendance of these agencies at case conferences and reviews would, of course, depend on the particular circumstances, and only those required to input would attend. This approach both made most effective use of resources and also protected the confidentiality of the cases. The MASH process went beyond the involvement of statutory organisations to include a wide range of other relevant agencies.

The Harrow Youth Parliament representative asked about the identification and protection of young people at risk. The Corporate Director, People Services acknowledged that the Council could never guarantee that all vulnerable children and young people would be protected, but great attention was paid to resourcing and establishing secure processes so that the risks were minimised. The Divisional Director, Children and Young People gave the example of careful monitoring of school attendance and outreach work with families and individuals under pressure. A Member asked about protection of girls at risk of FGM, particularly given the low level of prosecutions for the offence. The Corporate Director, People Services confirmed that the Ofsted inspection result reflected that the Council had appropriate measures in place in this respect; however, he underlined that the Council aspired to improve in all aspects of its work protecting children and young people.

The Harrow Youth Parliament representative referred to the issue of consistent and timely updating of Children in Need, Child Protection and Children Looked After assessments. The Corporate Director, People Services considered that the Council should be working to ensure its initial assessments were more reliable so that reassessments became less relevant.

RESOLVED: That the Ofsted inspection report and associated action plan be noted, along with the progress reports on the ten recommendations.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.26 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR PHILLIP O'DELL
Chair