

Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Panel 3 - 2023/2024: Children's Services

Date: Thursday, 25 January 2024

Venue: Committee Room 5 - Perceval House

Attendees (in person): Councillors

H Haili (Chair), R Baaklini, I Kingston, G Quansah, B Rai and G Stafford (Vice-Chair)

Apologies:

K Mohan

1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies were received for Councillor Karam Mohan.

2 Urgent Matters

There were no urgent matters.

3 Matters to be Considered in Private

Resolved: That all matters be considered in public as proposed.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Minutes

Resolved: That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 14 November 2023 are agreed as a correct record.

6 Strategy for Children with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

The Panel received a slide presentation from Madhu Bachu, Assistant Director, SEND and Julie Lewis, Director Learning Standards and School Partnerships, which set out Ealing's Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) strategy. Also attending the meeting were Fabiola Peacock, SEN Assessment Service Manager, Jeff Elgar, Head of Education, Health Care Plan (EHCP) Planning Services and Lucy Granger, Senior Education, Health and Care Co-ordinator.

The following areas were highlighted:

- In 2023, nationally 4.3% of pupils had an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan which was up from 4% in 2022. 13% of pupils had Special Education Needs (SEN) support, which was up from 12.6% in 2022. 88% of educational psychology services were experiencing difficulties with recruitment, there were recruitment crisis across all areas of health and therapy services, and last year 20% of schools lost their special education needs co-ordinators (SENCOs).
- From the new Care Quality Commission and Local Area SEND inspections, nationally the SEND arrangements that had attracted the most recommendations were access to health services, identification and assessment, joint commissioning, co-production, and preparing for adulthood.
- Ealing currently had 5.6 FTE educational psychologist vacancies, long waiting times for therapy services, and a reliance on expensive independent therapists. Out of 13 schools asked 50% did not have a SENCO. 4.6% (3705) of children had an EHCP and 10.6% (5827) had SEND support. An Education, Health and Care Coordinator (EHCCO) had an average caseload of 194 children and EHCCOs were working with 3,438 families. At the end of last year 86% of EHCPs were being assessed within the 20 week limit.
- The most common primary needs among children with an EHCP were autism spectrum disorder (ASD) 25%, and social, emotional, and mental health needs (SEMH) 27%. The most common primary needs among children with SEN Support were speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) 45%, SEMH 17% and moderate learning difficulties (MLD) 13%.
- Absence rates were higher among pupils with SEN at primary and secondary schools in Ealing, as was seen nationally. Pupils with SEN were overrepresented when it came to suspensions and permanent exclusions in state funded schools. This was a pattern also seen nationally.
- The challenges requiring joint ownership and prioritisation across the partnership included children not receiving allocated therapy, waiting times for ASD diagnosis, data sharing between health and the local authority, children not in full time education, exclusions, and recruitment and retention across services.

Panel members asked the following questions:

- What was being done to address the issues of recruitment and retention? Madhu Bachu replied that the service was working with the Ealing Learning Partnership to provide a robust training offer for teachers, SENCOs, and teaching assistants to help retain the workforce. A recruitment campaign was being carried out with health colleagues and Ealing was being promoted as an attractive place to

work. Assistant psychologists were being recruited from universities to work and train with Ealing.

- What success had there been from the recruitment campaigns? Members were informed that five assistant educational psychologists had chosen to stay and continue their training in Ealing. There were also less people leaving the service. Last year there had been a 100% turnover in the Special Education Needs Assessment Service and it was not currently in that position.
- Were the retention difficulties unique to Ealing? Madhu Bachu said that from attending regional and national meetings it was clear that this was the general experience. There was a lot of demand for staff and the offer of lower caseloads or higher pay elsewhere was attractive.
- For most of the primary care needs identified, Ealing was benchmarked at or below the national average. Speech, Language and Communication Needs were identified as higher than the London or England average, why was this? Madhu Bachu replied that this was being explored with the Speech and Language Therapy Service and a SEND Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) was being carried out to understand the needs and context. One of the issues being considered was the lack of take up of nursery provision from some families so that children were not being exposed to language at an early stage.
- Was it being considered as part of the JSNA that Ealing could be over diagnosing in comparison to other boroughs? Madhu Bachu said that this would need to be explored with medical colleagues who were doing the assessments and making the diagnosis.
- Headteachers of special schools have said that if they wanted to reduce the level of support for a student who they felt no longer required it, this could be done quickly with a phone call or email. However if they wanted to increase the level of support it was a long process. Would it be possible to make the process easier? Jeff Elgar replied that additional support was provided through the context of the annual review to see how the school had been meeting the needs of the young person or if there were needs that were unmet by the provision that had been put in place. This would be the same for a decrease in service and could not be done based on a phone call or email.
- Responding to a question on the lack of support for SEN pupils and the strain on schools, Madhu Bachu said that teachers, including headteachers received training on SEND but the level of need had changed. The local authority and Ealing Learning Partnership were trying to educate all school staff on SEND and needs and what best practice looked like, giving practical strategies and solutions that staff could implement to support children and young people. It could be

stressful for a child when the person that they knew and worked with was not available, schools were therefore encouraged not to just have one point of contact for the child. An access inclusion lead was now in post to work with schools and challenge them on exclusions and behaviour policies and whether they were making enough adjustments to support the child.

- The use of reduced timetables had increased in Ealing, which added to the pressures on parents. It also seemed to have a greater impact on the BAME community. Some children were only spending an hour a day in school. What strategies were being implemented to effectively address this? Madhu Bachu agreed that the use of reduced timetables was a concern. Guidance had been given to schools so that they understood how reduced timetables were to be used. Data was being gathered from schools to get a better understanding of the children who were on reduced timetables. Two early year specialist teachers had been recruited who were working in schools with teachers providing practical support and advice. There had also been investment in the Early Years SEND Outreach team working with individual children and families.
- Was training provided for the parents of children with reduced timetables to help them support their child's needs and to advocate for them? Madhu Bachu replied that Early Start key workers did some of that work with families and agreed that more work was needed. As a trial some digital literacy work had been done with families in Southall to help them understand how to access systems, the local offer, and GP services. The pilot had gone well and consideration was being given to how it could be scaled up.
- How were teaching assistants being equipped to have the knowledge, support and understanding of early years and childhood development which was crucial for working with SEN children? The Panel was informed that work had been carried out with one of the big employment agencies used to appoint teaching assistants, with SENCOs talking to candidates about what their day to day work would look like working with children with SEN. A range of training programmes were provided for them before they went into schools to provide the basic knowledge and when in schools they were provided with 'hand over hand' training from specialist SEN outreach workers.
- There were children who had not been diagnosed or received an EHCP and had been waiting for up to three years. What was being done about this and why were children who clearly needed support not receiving it? Jeff Elgar said that recent figures indicated that in 2023, 83% of EHCPs were assessed on time. That was 606 EHCPs issued within that year. An EHCP was issued for a young person who had significant needs, there would be young people with SEN but not of a severity that would require an EHCP. The young people with SEN support might progress to an EHCP but there would be interventions in

place to try and address the needs as best they could, which would be monitored. If the young person made progress, then they might not need to proceed to an EHCP.

- Was there a time limit on proceeding from SEN support to an EHCP if required? Members heard that it depended on the nature of the need, the complexity, and the evidence available to make a decision in relation to that. Where the difficulties were quite prevalent much earlier on in a young person's life, proceeding to a statutory assessment could be done at an earlier stage.
- How many children had to wait a long time from being assessed as requiring SEN support to receiving an EHCP? A school had a level of support that they could put in place to address the needs of a young person, which was the first lever of funding at £6,000. The Special Education Needs Co-ordinator could put in additional support depending on the need.
- A panel member commented that there were not enough training courses, especially face to face, for nurseries to equip staff to develop the skills they needed to work with children with additional needs. Madhu Bachu replied that there was a rich training offer but what had been noticed was that schools and nursery settings were struggling to release staff to attend. Whether training should be provided in the evenings or at weekends was being explored. It was also important to ensure that everyone was aware of the training available and a handbook on what was available for practitioners had been produced.

Officers continued the presentation setting out the four priorities of the SEND Strategy which had been launched in April 23, the progress so far and next steps. The priorities were:

1. To provide guidance, early identification of need and support for children, young people and their families so that schools and settings were supported to welcome every child and young person and set the highest expectations for them.
2. That every child and young person was prepared for the transition to a purposeful adulthood with opportunities for training and meaningful employment.
3. To ensure parents, young people and professional worked together to assess, review, meet needs and improve the quality and timeliness of Education Health and Care Plans through co-production.
4. To ensure sufficiency and quality of provision in settings, schools and services so that children and young people could have their health, social care and educational needs met and feel part of the wider local community.

The Panel asked the following questions:

- Where was the Family Hub Project Discovery conducted and what was

the impact? Members were informed that this was an initiative by the Government, Ealing did not qualify for it but put funding towards trialling the model and doing the research. Along with public health, work had been undertaken with a range of families and stakeholders to understand what families were struggling with and how help could be got to them at the earliest stages. The research had just finished and the findings were not yet available. Early thoughts were that hubs providing the services within the community would be more accessible.

- Priority 1 referred to focussing on reducing exclusion. In primary schools in years one and two, Ealing had a higher exclusion rate for children with a disability and learning difficulties. Was the exclusion lead trained to deal with SEN exclusions? Had the impact on SEN children of being excluded been considered? Was work undertaken with families prior to excluding a child? Madhu Bachu replied that the exclusion lead was an experienced SENCO with a good knowledge of SEN. The range of work that was being undertaken was outlined for members. A new panel had been set up, which when a child had been suspended put in support for the child and school to avoid an escalation to the next stage of exclusion. It considered what the child would need put in place, with funding attached, to have a successful time at school.
- What had been learned from the walks and talks events with parents? Madhu Bachu stated that the walks were undertaken regularly and there were also parent partner meetings. As a direct result of feedback received in the summer, the annual review process was being changed. Feedback also influenced strategies and policies, which were working documents which continued to be refreshed.
- How were EHCPs being monitored, who should be doing the annual review and what measures were being taken to improve the identification and assessment process in this area? The Panel was informed that all the processes around the annual review were being reviewed. The model was being changed to ensure that there was more monitoring and that SENCOs were able to follow up with schools on the provisions in the EHCP that the children should be receiving. The service was working to improve the speed of the annual review.
- Priority 4 referred to the expansion of special school provision, what capacity would that give? Members were informed that in total there were 989 places available in Ealing special schools and 361 places in Ealing Additional Resourced Provision (ARPs) and units. Up to 500 additional specialist places were needed by 2028. Work was being done to expand provision across Ealing by increasing satellite or second sites of the special schools, expanding ARP numbers, and providing additional specialist resource provision in primary and secondary schools.
- Responding to questions about recent changes to processes and

templates, Madhu Bachu informed members that Ealing's local offer which contained the updated processes and templates was available at ealingfamiliesdirectory.org.uk

Officers set out the travel assessment and assistance provision for eligible children of compulsory school age. Members were informed that during the academic year of 2022-23, the local authority considered 602 new applications for travel assistance. Of those 322 were agreed for shared transport, 49 for a personal independence budget, 12 for independent travel training, and 219 were not agreed for travel assistance as they did not meet the criteria.

The Panel asked the following questions:

- Was there an appeals process for the children that had been turned down? How did the figures applying for transport assistance compare with previous years? Jeff Elgar replied that comparator data was not available. The budget might continue to increase as the number using transport was 30% of the current population of children with EHCPs and the trajectory for EHCPs was rising. There was an appeals process, 171 were made in 2022-23 of those 66% were not successful.
- Up to what sort of distances did children have to travel? Members were informed that it was the amount of time spent on a route that was important. There were guidelines in terms of the age of the young person and the length of time spent on the route to school.
- Parents often wanted to speak directly to a member of staff about the services on offer and digitalisation could be a barrier for them particularly if they were distressed. How could that be overcome? Madhu Bachu said that the intention was to remodel the Special Education Needs Assessment services so that the SENCOs were able to be accessible to families and work through the forms with them. The service was also intending to set up a SENA support phone line with a SENCO answering it.

The Chair invited members of the public to ask their questions.

Ade Banjoko, Director, Parents Action and Resource Centre said that some parents had expressed concerns about the lengthy assessment processes and felt that their concerns were not being given due consideration. In some cases the pupils' behaviour had deteriorated and had then become a disciplinary issue often leading to exclusion.

Mr Banjoko asked the following questions. Were there specific measures in place to prevent any potential racial disparities in the assessment process? How was Ealing going to ensure that parents, regardless of their background, had equitable access to support without the need for persistent advocacy? What monitoring would there be of the new initiatives that the Panel had heard were being put in place? What percentage of the different categories of

SEN were experienced by black children and other ethnicities? Were parents contacted by the local authority after a child was suspended from school to check on the support they were getting? Mr Banjoko stated that this should happen automatically and that the local authority needed to verify the information from the school especially if the school was recommending a pupil referral unit. Educationists involved in seeking equity in education had described the over representation in pupil referral units of African Caribbean pupils as the new scandal. Was this a concern for Ealing and what was being done to address this?

Hodman Noor, parent of a SEN Child and health lead for Ealing Carer and Parent Forum stated that the graph in the report emphasised the statistics related to the timeframe and annual issuance of EHCPs. However, it did not include figures regarding the implementation status and whether the targets were met after issuance to both the child and the school. This omission was significant because it reflected a key challenge faced by parents, the scarcity of resources leading to some children not receiving adequate speech-language support. Mrs Noor asked for insights into the support measures in place, and how the allocated funding was utilised? How did the local authority actively monitor the utilisation of these funds? Was there support available for parents to access speech and language and other therapies if they were not available in school? How did the SEND strategy involve parents, carers, and the wider community in decision-making processes and the development of support services for children with SEND and additional needs?

Fabiola Peacock, SEN Assessment Service Manager responded that it was important to define that there were two aspects to the assessment process. The Education, Health and Care (EHC) needs assessment was a 20 week process determined by the SEND regulations. The process did not start when an EHC was requested. There was an acceptance that the identification and meeting of needs started much earlier than an EHCP. Ms Peacock added that there was now a Head of Inclusion in SEND services who would be visiting schools to provide support and challenge and seeing if there were particular groups that were over represented. There was a planned cycle of case reviews and where groups were over represented in exclusions and severe absence these would be looked at. It had been known for some time that there were groups that were over represented, the service was now at a stage where it was considering what to do with the data and the case reviews would help with that.

Julie Lewis added that there was an education race equality action plan that addressed the seven demands of Ealing's Race Equality Commission. It was a rigorous plan with 25 key performance indicators and the service was held to account by the Education committee of the Race Equality Tribunal. All aspects of the plan were also reported back on to the Race Equality Parent Forum.

Madhu Bachu said that there was work to be done in terms of ensuring that the targets on the children's plans were being met, this would be addressed in the annual review process and by developing a new SENA team model.

Regarding access to Speech and Language Therapy, the sharing of data between the local authority and health was an area of challenge which was being worked on. The contract with the therapy service had been reviewed and included an expectation of access to data, so that the authority could identify whether children were getting the service that they needed. Schools did use independent speech and language therapists which the local authority paid for if the authority's therapists were not able to provide it. However it was important to create some quality assurance around that.

The Chair requested that a response to the question on the ethnicity breakdown of the different categories of SEN be provided in writing.

Concluding this item, the Chair thanked the officers for their comprehensive presentation to the Panel.

Recommendations:

1. That the SEND Joint Strategic Needs Assessment should consider with medical colleagues whether the over diagnosis of Speech, Language and Communication Needs was a factor for higher rates in comparison with other boroughs.
2. Further consideration should be given to how best to address the use of reduced school timetables and enable schools to better support pupils to remain in school.
3. That the ethnicity breakdown of the pupils in the different categories of SEN be provided in writing.

7 Panel's Work Programme

The Panel's work programme was noted.

8 Date of Next Meeting

The Panel noted that the next scheduled meeting was on 26 March 2024.

Meeting commenced: 7.02 pm

Meeting finished: 9.20 pm

Signed:

Dated: Tuesday, 26 March 2024

H Haili (Chair)