

Children and Families Scrutiny Committee and Communities Scrutiny Committee Joint Themed Review 2022-23 Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in Child Safeguarding

Chair's Introduction

Every child deserves to be treated fairly, proportionately and as a child. The race, religion or background of a child should never result in their unfair treatment.

The horrific case of Child Q in 2022 raised significant concerns about racism and adultification in the safeguarding of children across the country. This case was not the first of its kind, nor has it been the last. Waltham Forest Council has taken steps to learn from these cases and to improve our practices.

We chose to take a detailed look at equality, diversity and inclusion in child safeguarding as Chairs of Children and Families scrutiny and Communities scrutiny; the first joint scrutiny review undertaken by Waltham Forest Council. Working together allowed us to draw upon more experiences and a wider expertise than if we had approached this review alone. We decided to focus on the safeguarding experiences of children from Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority backgrounds following the case of Child Q.

Our review looked at the safeguarding experiences of children within education, care services and youth justice. Good safeguarding practices in education, care and youth justice can have a transformational impact upon the life chances of a child. We found the Council has a lot of good practice and with this review it will build, strengthen and shape our priorities and work moving forward.

This review does not finish here. We must continue to focus on this and the Council must continue to advocate for young people that experience disproportionality in youth justice, care and education settings. It is incumbent upon all of us to take steps to prevent racism and the resulting disproportionate treatment of children.

As Chairs and committees we have been especially moved by the contributions of children and young people to this report. Their experiences must be at the centre of how we approach and improve safeguarding practices. This scrutiny review would not have been possible without them. We are incredibly grateful for their honesty and bravery in sharing their experiences with us to improve practices for future generations of children. We would like to thank all the young people who contributed

to this report and its recommendations, including the Waltham Forest Young Advisors.

We would like to thank everyone who gave evidence to this report, council officers, for all their support and the members of both scrutiny committees for their contributions. Thank you to the relevant cabinet members, Cllr Alistair Strathern and Cllr Khevyn Limbajee, for their support.

Summary of recommendations

The Committee recommends:

Recommendation 1: Services must continue to champion children in care and explore innovative ways to achieve this. This must be accompanied by advocating for young people that experience disproportionality in youth justice, care and education settings.

Recommendation 2: Services to consider ways to improve communication and signpost children/young people in the youth justice system to activities in the borough (such as the new Youth Hubs).

Recommendation 3: The Council supports the extension of the Ether program.

Recommendation 4: That the committee hear from police officers who work with vulnerable young people in the 'reachable moment' and seek to gain insight as to how we can divert them away from violence.

Recommendation 5: Services to investigate whether the payment process for those in care can be simplified to ensure young people do not miss out on experiences (such as educational trips).

Recommendation 6: Council to investigate why MyGuide (electric tool) is not universally used and address these barriers.

Recommendation 7: The criteria for access to a leaving care coach is simplified and well signposted. That services let our care leavers know that they are entitled to support until the age of 25, including telephone and face to face.

Recommendation 8: Adequate space is reserved within the new Children and Families hub in order for the coaches and social workers to facilitate group activities like table tennis to allow care leavers to socialize more fully and regularly. Services to facilitate Councillor's and Care Leavers engagement by inviting Councillors to existing activities.

Recommendation 9: Committee task cabinet with reporting back [Should receive a report on how this will be achieved.] That all possible efforts are made to place our care leavers at the forefront of all employment, apprenticeship and training opportunities provided by Waltham Forest council and its partners/stakeholders.

Recommendation 10: That training for a 'care informed' approach be embedded into the relevant departments working with care-leavers (in a similar manner to the recommendations of the VAWG task and finish group regarding a 'trauma informed approach'). This training should also be made available to Councillors and be supplemented by workshops for council employees that focus on diversity and disproportionality experienced by young people in care.

Recommendation 11: Council to research reasons for biases in PRU exclusions and alternative provision and work with young people whilst in and other alternative provision and work with schools address these issues.

Recommendation 12: Officers seek to find ways to standardise careers training across schools.

Background

In July 2022, the Communities Scrutiny Committee and the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee decided to look at *Equality, diversity, and inclusion in child safeguarding* as a joint themed review. The Committees sought to understand barriers facing young people whilst they are in the education system, care system and Youth Justice System (YJS) to ensure each young person in the borough has the same opportunities. The past few years have highlighted the importance of safeguarding and championing young people, as a repercussion of the pandemic was a heightened national conscience surrounding inequalities. Members believe it is important the Council does everything within its power to support every young person within the borough, allowing them the best chance of success. Members sought to investigate and tackle inequalities within the borough, focusing on three main areas: education, the care system and the youth justice system.

Methodology

Both Committee's dedicated one agenda item per meeting which looked at a topic pertinent to the review, these agenda items were discussed with members from both Committees present. Most reports were written by internal officers and the Portfolio Lead Member for children and young people and one report was written by representatives from the Metropolitan (MET) Police.

Members sought to understand the experiences of young people living in the borough. To achieve this, members of the Young Advisors (YA) and Youth Independent Advisory Group (YIAG) were present at each meeting to provide input. Alongside this, three evidence sessions were held. Conversations were facilitated by different groups of young people who shared their views of experiencing care, the youth justice system and education (both mainstream and pupil referral unit - PRU).

12th October 2022¹

The Chair's of the Communities Scrutiny Committee and the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee invited members to think about potential topics they would like to explore for a joint themed review during the introductory meeting held 19th July 2022. When the Committee's met in October, they discussed the proposed themed review scoping document which had been prepared by Scrutiny officers. The following potential themes were raised: the journey of the child, safeguarding issues around the police, Stop and Search, experiences of black children in the education system, inequalities within school experiences and training teachers to work with children of different cultures. It was clear members sought to understand the experiences of young people within the borough. Members wanted to focus on education and support offered to young people who had experienced care and those who have been in contact with the Youth Justice System.

18th October 2022²

The Committee's agreed the themed review would draw on the experiences of young people, by inviting them to collaborate. It was important that young people felt they had a voice and could report unjust incidents without fear of repercussions or causing further trauma. It was also suggested that the Committee could look at how permanent exclusions disproportionately affected black boys, and how university processes looked at the history and relationship between parents of candidates, which could be perceived as racist.

The meetings held in October allowed for the Committees to streamline their focus. Following discussions with members and key officers, the title of the themed review was agreed, and the forward plan of meetings confirmed and circulated.

30th November 2022³

Superintendent Alex Kay, Chief Inspector Owen Pyle, Inspector Kamran Qureshi and Inspector Rob Sewell from the Metropolitan Police presented the Committees with statistics pertaining to Stop and Search's (S&S) conducted within the borough. Statistics included breakdowns by ethnicity and age. Mr Brown, the CEO of the charity Spark2Life, attended the meeting as expert witnesses. YA/YAIG also provided input, rooted in their first-hand experience encountering Metropolitan Police Officers whilst living in Waltham Forest.

¹ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Cid=727&Mid=5552&Ver=4>

² <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Cid=723&Mid=5557&Ver=4>

³ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Cid=723&Mid=5558&Ver=4>

The Committees learned how individuals were supported after they had experienced a Stop and Search. Mr Brown said that Spark2Life went into schools to gather the views of young people and help train police officers to be more culturally observant during Stop and Search. Trust in the police had remained low amongst young people, so Spark2Life were looking to talk to police recruits about how to use Stop and Search correctly. Young people had indicated that the idea of going to a follow-up meeting with the police was not a good idea following a traumatic experience and did not have faith in the complaints system.

This meeting enabled the Committees to understand the current statistical landscape of S&S in Waltham Forest. Members learned about the systems the Metropolitan Police have in place to ensure S&S are conducted in a lawful way. Expert witnesses provided the members with first-hand experiences and outlined the work being done to improve trust between young people and the Police. The Committees gained an understanding of what young people want to help them feel safer when encountering the police.

13th December 2022⁴

Ms Davies, the Assistant Director of Youth and Family Resilience presented a report on 'Inclusive Schools and Alternative Provision Strategy' which highlighted the impact that the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis was having on exclusions, which had seen a disproportionate increase in the number of black children being excluded. Officers noted the highest rate of suspensions remained amongst Gypsy and Roma children.

The Committees learned how issues such as the cost-of-living crisis and racism are considered to ensure the right decision is made, these include support from the SEND team and referrals to CAMHS. Members also learned advocacy was available for parents who struggled with English as a second language. If a caseworker needed to be assigned, an interpreter can be provided.

This meeting allowed members to gain an understanding of the statistics behind young people who are excluded from school as well as building an awareness of resources available to young people who require them.

18th April 2023⁵

Ms Koroma, Interim Director for Youth and Family Resilience Service presented a report on Youth Offenders. The report included Waltham Forest's equality objectives for 2022-26 which promises 'delivery [of] inclusive services which actively address

⁴ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=727&MIId=5553&Ver=4>

⁵ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=723&MIId=5560&Ver=4>

inequality and exclusions and enable all residents of WF to release their potential'. The Committee's learned how despite a decreased nationally in the number of children entering the criminal justice system, children from ethnic minority backgrounds continue to be over-represented at most stages of the youth justice system. Members heard about diversion schemes in place and intervention examples as well as borough-specific statistics.

Members found the Ether programme interesting and questioned how the Council could ensure this continues as feedback from young people who have completed the group has been positive. The programme is an evidence-based intervention for children who identify as Black or belonging to an ethnic minority group, using inspirational leadership to address issues around race and identity over 8-sessions.

Members then discussed how families are supported when their child enters the YJS or is excluded from school. They agreed a future item should come to a scrutiny committee regarding re-offending rates and education.

Young People's Evidence Sessions

Members participated in two evidence sessions which were held on the 6th March 2023 and the 4th April 2023. These sessions sought to speak to young people and hear their experiences and opinions first hand. The following groups were identified for participation: YA/YIAG and Voices in Partnership (VIP) and Voices and Influence (those experiencing care and care leavers). The Committee wanted to speak to lesser heard groups of young people in the borough however, due to time constraints it was only possible to organise sessions with groups affiliated with the Council. It has been noted that Councillors would like to run future sessions with different groups going forward.

In preparation for the evidence sessions a time and location was decided on which would suit the different groups of young people. It was agreed holding sessions in the Chamber may not promote conversation as not all participants would feel comfortable with the setting. Scrutiny officers worked with members to identify a set of questions and then worked with officers to ensure these are suitable for the young people. Some officers chose to circulate with the young people ahead of the session and others waited until during. This ensured the young people were preparing for the evidence session in a way that suited them. Before the sessions began, officers explained the themed review and the goal of the meeting, the young people were informed everything they shared would be anonymous and they had the right to refrain from answering questions which made them uncomfortable and could leave at any time. Following the session findings were collated, anonymised, and circulated with officers to ensure they were happy with the content and there was no risk of deductive disclosure. Findings were then circulated to all members for them to consider recommendations.

6th March 2023, Voices in Partnership (ViP - those with experience of the YJS) and YA/YIAG

This evidence session was held in Walthamstow Town Hall. Participants were provided snacks and given an ice-breaker activity, which aimed to integrate both groups and help them to feel comfortable. Following this, the young people were divided into three groups. Each group contained a mix of YAIG/YA and ViP members, along with an officer and a Councillor.

The groups were encouraged to go through the set questions which had been cleared by the relevant officers to ensure they were suitable for the young people. The questions sought to uncover whether the young people had experienced any discrimination during their time in education, ways the Council can support them better following interactions with the Criminal Justice System and whether they feel their protected characteristics are considered when encountering these services.

The consensus was young people were not aware of help and support available to them and greater signposting was needed. There was many examples of young people facing discrimination in educational settings and no support being offered. There is a lack of support provided to young people following an encounter with the criminal justice system, with some young people not knowing how having a juvenile record could affect them in the future. Councillors found that these sessions provided young people with the opportunity to share experiences which they would not otherwise have heard.

4th April 2023, Voices and Influence (those experiencing care and care leavers)

The second evidence session was split into two halves, the morning being spent with young people who are currently experiencing care and the afternoon with care leavers. Both sessions were held in the Hub, situated in Leyton Cricket Ground. Young people were not presented with questions ahead of the meeting, these sessions were tackled differently as these young people have less experience with Councillors. Following discussion with Officers it was decided the discussions would be much more informal, with the young people leading them.

The morning session was centred around what issues young people currently experiencing care faced and what support they would like. Participants were grateful for the support provided by the Hub and emphasised how it provided them with a family and somewhere they felt comfortable. They expressed disappointment in missing out of some experiences due to the long process of securing funding for education trips. The participants also sought for a greater understanding of their position across the borough. They suggested an awareness training where

Councillors and employees of the Council could learn more about what they experience and encouraging a closer relationship between themselves and Councillors.

The afternoon session focused on what care leavers wished they had been told before they moved from a care setting to an independent one. Many young people expressed how the transition can be overwhelming, with greater support needed when it comes to bills and finances. Some found the transition lonely but struggled to ask for help. The young people stated the Hub provided vital learning points for them as they can learn how to cook quick, nutritious meals and create bonds through their shared experiences. A prevalent worry for the young people was not being able to carry on with further education. Councillors were told how young people likely had to claim benefits when they initially move into their independent spaces, which comes with stigma. This also hinders them from financially supporting themselves at university. Councillors and young people explored ways which the Council could support young people and agreed a welcome-binder with an array of ward-specific information and signposting to financial support would be beneficial.

These sessions demonstrated whilst there are support systems in place for young people, there are also gaps which hinder them from having the best start in their young adult lives. Further work is needed to ensure young people are supported in every aspect of their lives and processes are simplified to ensure they do not miss out on opportunities because they are experiencing care.

Key findings

The Committee recommends:

Services must continue to champion children in care and explore innovative ways to achieve this. This must be accompanied by advocating for young people that experience disproportionality in youth justice, care and education settings.

This is an overall recommendation which encompasses each element of the themed review. Members felt it was important for the Council to champion the young people who live in the borough. Both Committees strive towards including themes which arose during the themed review in the forward plans for the 23/24 cycle of meetings. The review has demonstrated a greater need for consistent communication between different areas of the Council and there is great merit in bringing different groups of young people together to share their differing experiences.

The Committee recommends:

Services to consider ways to improve communication and signpost children/young people in the youth justice system to activities in the borough (such as the new Youth Hubs).

The Council supports the extension of the Ether program.

That the committee hear from police officers who work with vulnerable young people in the 'reachable moment' and seek to gain insight as to how we can divert them away from violence.

These recommendations focus on the Council's role working with stakeholders and partners in preventing and supporting those who have experienced the criminal justice system. Members found there was support and safe spaces available for young people within the borough however, more could be done when promoting these. Members recommended that officers could evaluate how they currently promote youth spaces and how these could be tailored to meet a wider audience. Members were particularly impressed with the Ether program and encouraged the Council to recommission this. Discussions which involved representatives from the MET police highlighted the importance of reaching young people at opportune moments. It was proposed that the Council continues work in collaboration with the police to develop further ways young people can be diverted away from crime.

The Committee recommends:

Services to investigate whether the payment process for those in care can be simplified to ensure young people do not miss out on experiences (such as educational trips).

Council to investigate why MyGuide (electric tool) is not universally used and address these barriers.

Committee task cabinet with reporting back [Should receive a report on how this will be achieved.] That all possible efforts are made to place our care leavers at the forefront of all employment, apprenticeship and training opportunities provided by Waltham Forest council and its partners/stakeholders.

These recommendations are geared towards removing barriers faced by those experiencing care to ensure every young person in the borough has the best chance of success. Members were satisfied there are existing support mechanisms in place for young people however, the Council could do more to simplify these processes. Simplifying processes, where possible, will speed up funding requests and ensure

young people do not miss out on opportunities. Both Committee's took inspiration from the Growth Scrutiny Committee, who are exploring ways to provide opportunities for young people in the borough when the University of Portsmouth Campus opens. With this in mind, members are keen that the Council are held to account with its promise to provide opportunities for those experiencing care and care leavers, ensuring the Council and stakeholders are doing everything within its power as a corporate parent.

The Committee recommends:

The criteria for access to a leaving care coach is simplified and well signposted. That services let our care leavers know that they are entitled to support until the age of 25, including telephone and face to face.

Adequate space is reserved within the new Children and Families hub in order for the coaches and social workers to facilitate group activities like table tennis to allow care leavers to socialize more fully and regularly. Services to facilitate Councillor's and Care Leavers engagement by inviting Councillors to existing activities.

That training for a 'care informed' approach be embedded into the relevant departments working with care-leavers (in a similar manner to the recommendations of the VAWG task and finish group regarding a 'trauma informed approach'). This training should also be made available to Councillors and be supplemented by workshops for council employees that focus on diversity and disproportionality experienced by young people in care.

The above recommendations recognise the Council provides support and safe spaces for those experiencing care however, improvements can be made. The evidence sessions highlighted how young people were not aware they were entitled to support until the age of 25 with many reporting they feel isolated and overwhelmed once they made the transition to semi-independent or independent living. Both Committee's are excited by the new hubs which will provide a safe space for young people to meet and socialise. It was recognised that guaranteed space within these hubs would promote a comfortable environment for young people to ask questions and find out further information about the support they are entitled to. Members also recognise the merits of a trauma informed approach, which has been used in a previous themed review (Violence against Women and Girls). If the Council were to develop and implement this training, it would promote a greater understanding of the challenges faced by young people experiencing care.

The Committee recommends:

Council to research reasons for biases in PRU exclusions and alternative provision and work with young people whilst in and other alternative provision and work with schools address these issues.

Officers seek to find ways to standardise careers training across schools.

Following on from the evidence sessions where members heard about varying experiences of young people whilst in education, they sought to find ways to ensure every young person is entitled to a level of support appropriate to them in various educational settings. It was clear further work needed to be done to investigate biases behind exclusions. Members hope the Council will work with teachers and students to ensure exclusions are fair and students and their families are offered support. It was also noted that there was a discrepancy in the quality of careers advice across the borough. Members recommended the Council should seek ways to standardise careers advice and ensure every young person is given an opportunity to plan for their future.

Conclusion

The remit of this themed review was broad and wide-ranging, underpinned by ambitious aims to ensure young people living in Waltham Forest are well supported and encouraged to strive for success. Officers showcased successful projects and schemes throughout the themed review, offered by the Council and in collaboration with external stakeholders. Whilst members felt the current work was no doubt helping some young people, they felt the support could go further. The most prevalent concern was support was not widely advertised enough meaning young people missed out on opportunities to seek help. The Council will help countless more young people by investigating new and innovative ways to promote support.

Young people provided valuable input via evidence sessions, challenging members to shift their perspectives. Both committee's hope more evidence sessions can be conducted over the next municipal year. Members are mindful that due to time constraints the evidence sessions were limited and would like to reach out to lesser heard voices going forward, to ensure every young voice is championed. Officers will work collaboratively with groups of young people who do not work as closely with the Council, to continue the impact of this themed review.

Due to the wide array of topics members wanted to focus on, there have been many discussions which have not been covered by this themed review. Topics for further investigation have been noted by the Committee's throughout the process and will be taken into consideration when planning the forward plan for the 2023/24 municipal year. The overarching recommendation to ensure the Council continue to advocate for young people that experience disproportionality in youth justice, care and education settings marks a commitment of both Committees to hold the Council to account and provide young people with the tools for the best chance of success.