

Annual Report

Children, Education and Families Committee

Chair: Cllr Nicky Dykes

Vice Chair: Cllr Judi Ellis

Overview

It's been a busy year as the committee worked to adapt to virtual meetings, working hard to ensure that the appropriate level of scrutiny was delivered. Although not able to meet in person the committee was able to embark successfully on policy development in addition to scrutiny.

Covid-19

It would be remiss not to start with the impact of Covid-19 and the focus on ensuring that our most vulnerable young people and families were getting the support they needed during this difficult time. At the beginning of the pandemic the committee held a special session to hear from the Portfolio Holder and the senior leadership team, how they were responding to these unique circumstances and ensuring service delivery. This meant the committee was able to ensure that the services that were needed were being delivered and understand how the department was responding to the challenge of the pandemic.

At every committee meeting members have been able to scrutinise the Portfolio Holder and the Department Heads on their response to Covid-19 – whether it be working with schools to ensure that students have the technology they need to learn from home, to supporting families that have children with complex health needs or maintaining access to foodbank vouchers and counselling services. As Chair of the committee I was keen that the department advertised the support available and was pleased to see the relevant signposting made available on all LBB channels, as recommended by the committee.

We heard how the department responded rapidly to the evolving environment providing electronic food vouchers, keeping our 6 children and family centres open in a Covid compliant way (when regulations allowed), dropping off activity packs for children, ensuring it was possible for essential health services to continue safely such as midwife and health visitor checks and maintaining close contact with schools and early years settings to ensure they were supported.

Meeting structure

The committee scrutinises many statutory annual reports. Whilst this is important, the committee felt that data and information was out of date by the time it came to committee. It was therefore recommended that those giving updates on an annual report would provide supplementary information to provide up to date information on the subject area. Going forward the committee will receive reports every 6 months (evenly spread out over all the committee meetings) to provide a timely update on these important areas before finally receiving the annual report at the end of the year. This allows for timely scrutiny on up to date information whilst ensuring that all annual reports aren't scrutinised in one session.

Whilst setting out this new process, the committee has also requested the inclusion of a report from the early intervention and family support team that run our children and family centres and provide many important support services to families in the borough.

This year also saw the Budget Sub Committee return which allowed members to dedicate the session to detailed scrutiny of the spend of the department and budget setting going forward.

Policy Development

Budget

The committee established a budget task and finish group to closer analyse the budget setting process of the department. The task and finish group met twice and commissioned analysis to compare the per unit costs of Bromley services to other boroughs. This analysis shows that Bromley performs well, and the group found that providing this comparison was a useful tool in scrutiny. The group therefore recommended that this work is done on an annual basis going forward.

The group also noted that unlike other departmental budgets there is a high level of volatility which should be noted.

Youth engagement and representation

The committee believes that hearing the voice of our young people is crucial, particularly in fulfilling our role as corporate parents. The committee decided to create a youth engagement task and finish group. The group met once and discussed many ways to engage with young people in the borough such as involvement in projects for the community, running their own initiatives and youth facilities in the borough. The group is still to finish this work as some of the work had to be postponed due to the pandemic but will be meeting again next session to take this work forward.

The committee also recognised that whilst it was very good to have a member of the Bromley Youth Council (BYC) on the committee, due to the sometimes long agendas and late finishes there may be a better way to ensure that they are engaged in the work of the committee. Similarly, the committee wanted to make sure the voice of the children that are in the care of the council and to who councillors are corporate parents too had their voice heard.

After initial conversations with the Living in Care Council (LinCC) and the BYC it was decided to trial a new approach. For the previous two meetings items have been chosen from the committee agenda for the LinCC and BYC to review and scrutinise. The relevant officer also provides a short and easy to digest accompanying presentation to support this scrutiny. Myself and Cllr Ellis, along with officers, then met with both groups separately to discuss the reports and for our young people to ask their questions. These are held close to the committee meetings so that officers and myself as Chair can relay their views and questions asked to committee members. This has occurred for two committee meetings with our young people providing input on the Virtual School Annual Report and the IRO Annual Report. This has been very useful and the level of scrutiny and questions from our young people has been excellent. We have already taken on board and actioned some of their recommendations such as making a youth friendly version of reports available for LinCC and BYC to share in their forums.

Conclusion

It has been a busy year and the department has needed to respond to the impact of the pandemic quickly, whilst also continuing with business as usual. The committee has been focused on ensuring that our vulnerable young people and families have what they need whilst also ensuring resilience in the department. It has been a tough year and we would like to say thank you to officers for the support they have given to the work of the committee and hard work that has been done through this challenging year.