

BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL
SCRUTINY PANEL ON BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

4.00pm 13 JUNE 2013

COMMITTEE ROOM 1, BRIGHTON TOWN HALL

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Buckley (Chair) Councillors Brown and Gilbey, Amanda Mortensen (Parent Governor Co-optee), Sam Watling (Youth Council co-optee), Professor Robin Banerjee (independent advisor)

PART ONE

1. PROCEDURAL BUSINESS

- 1.1 No member declared an interest.
- 1.2 The Press and Public were not excluded from the meeting.

2. CHAIR'S COMMUNICATIONS

- 2.1 Cllr Buckley welcomed everyone to the meeting, and introduced her fellow panel members: Cllr Vanessa Brown, Cllr Penny Gilbey, Sam Watling (Youth Council co-optee), Amanda Mortensen (Parent Governor co-optee), and Professor Robin Banerjee (independent advisor).
- 2.2 Cllr Buckley thanked the witnesses for agreeing to give evidence, and reminded members that this panel had been established following a scrutiny request from Cllr Andrew Wealls.

3. INFORMATION FROM WITNESSES

- 3.1 **Evidence from Sam Beal (SB), BHCC. Chair of the Anti-Bullying and Equality Strategy Group.**
 - 3.11 SB told the panel that local authority (LA) / schools partnership working remained strong despite the recent reduction in LEA powers with regard to schools. Schools were still engaging with the LA – most were returning data and completing the annual schools survey, despite no longer being statutorily obliged to do so. Other partnerships are robust also – with good third sector involvement, and an active Youth Council.
 - 3.12 The LA considers bullying to be a high priority issue, partly because it is important in itself, but also because there is a significant link between the wellbeing of pupils and school attainment, and because the council needs to ensure that there are effective anti-bullying measures in place in order to fulfil its statutory equalities duties.

- 3.13 The Anti-Bullying and Equality Strategy Group is a partnership body co-ordinating anti-bullying work across the city. Its priorities include developing an agreed definition of bullying, signposting the full range of relevant services in the city to schools, and developing information for parents. There is a particular focus on prevention: helping young people develop social and emotional skills, and on better understanding the needs of the 'protected' equalities groups.
- 3.14 The most prevalent form of bullying (according to survey data) is verbal abuse. Cyber-bullying is reported at a relatively low level in the survey, its prevalence increasing with age. However, there may well be under-reporting here, with young people adopting a more robust definition of what constitutes cyber-bullying than the official definition.
- 3.15 Individuals suffering bullying will be supported by their schools, although the Access to Education team is able to provide some support for children and families experiencing bullying; particularly when this is leading to absence from school. The school support varies according to the nature of the bullying incidents and the school, but there is typically a focus on restorative justice and on rebuilding relationships. However, schools will use sanctions, including exclusions, where necessary.
- 3.16 The majority of schools do engage fully with the LA, completing the annual survey etc. The LA encourages all schools to take part, and those who choose not to may well do so due to in-year capacity pressures, and may contribute in subsequent years. Free schools and academies are invited to play a full part in sharing data.
- 3.17 Survey results show that more students claim to enjoy school than claim not to be bullied, suggesting that some students record both being bullied *and* enjoying school. SB explained that this may well be the case, since students may find that school is a safe haven, despite being bullied – particularly if their home background is troubled.
- 3.18 Children who are bullied and not effectively supported at school may eventually choose to move to a different school. Some of these cases may be managed through the Behaviour and Attendance Partnership meetings.
- 3.19 There is some variation between city schools in terms of reported bullying. In secondary schools the variation is 11-19%, with all schools showing a consistent downward trend over time. In primary schools the variation is 8-40%. As they are typically much smaller than secondaries, data from primary schools is much more vulnerable to fluctuation.
- 3.20 There has been a small increase in primary school pupils who report they are being bullied saying that the bullying included racism. This may be because pupils are becoming more aware of what constitutes racism and more confident in reporting it, or it might mean an increase in racism in primary schools and so this is being actively monitored.
- 3.21 **Evidence from Nick Wergan, Deputy Head Teacher, Blatchington Mill School (BMS).**
- 3.22 BMS prevents bullying by:

- * An anti-bullying ethos must be embedded in the school – this is then owned by all staff and students, not just a top-down initiative, and is central to the school’s ethos, not a peripheral issue
- * Taking a zero tolerance attitude to bullying – every incident is treated seriously
- * Taking every opportunity to talk about bullying – message needs to be constantly re-stated
- * Prioritising equalities – not waiting to tackle equalities-related bullying when it occurs
- * Taking collective responsibility – bullying can be a group action and it is vital that everyone understands this – bystanders are implicated in bullying as well as perpetrators
- * Ensuring that students recognise that bullying needs adult involvement – BMS is proud to be a ‘telling’ school
- * Involving students – students themselves are central to shaping the school’s ethos, and are vital to the success of any anti-bullying strategy
- * Recognising that bullying can take many forms – including cyber-bullying and social exclusion
- * Having a consistent approach to bullying throughout the school.

- 3.23 Data collection is important, but especially if the information is then used to inform school planning.
- 3.24 BMS is not over-concerned about defining an incident as bullying; what is important is ensuring that there is a satisfactory resolution to every incident of conflict between students. To this end, year teams record every incident and senior leadership reviews the action taken with regard to each incident at monthly intervals.
- 3.25 BMS works very closely with 3rd sector groups such as Allsorts, focusing on helping the most vulnerable students to build resilience.
- 3.26 BMS investigates every report of bullying, offering immediate support to victims and ensuring that there is a short term resolution in place which protects the victim. Where necessary there will be immediate sanction for perpetrators. In the medium term restorative justice measures can be supportive and in the longer term ongoing monitoring can prevent recurrence.
- 3.27 BMS takes cyber-bullying seriously and has invested in software that identifies inappropriate use of school ICT systems. However, cyber-bullying is complex because harassment does not necessarily take place in school and can therefore be difficult to tackle. Rather than just policing on-line activity it is important to engage students in a dialogue about what is and is not acceptable in terms of on-line peer communication. There is a broader social issue here – in a recent OECD survey, the UK scored very poorly when young people were asked whether their peers were kind and helpful. Some of the problems we face with cyber-bullying may therefore reflect broader problems with

social interaction – there is a role for schools here, but it is by no means just a problem for schools.

- 3.28 BMS is proud of its work with regard to bullying, but is not complacent, and is currently focusing particularly on collecting data around the experiences of children from all vulnerable groups.
- 3.29 Bullying behaviour is probably fairly equally split between boys and girls, although bullying amongst girls may be more likely to involve social exclusion, and is more likely to manifest as group bullying. Bullying amongst girls can also be less explicit and therefore harder to detect than that between boys.
- 3.30 The ostensible reason for bullying is most often appearance and then ability. However, the apparent reason for bullying is often not the underlying reason.
- 3.31 Staff training is key here. Staff represent almost the entirety of a school's resources and are therefore the main way in which improvement can be engineered. BMs undertakes considerable staff training around bullying, including pastoral and teaching teams, with a particular focus on challenging discriminatory language and behaviour.
- 3.32 There can be instances where parents and schools disagree on whether behaviour constitutes bullying. However, even where BMS may not consider bullying has taken place, it takes every incident and report seriously, since children's wellbeing has still been compromised.
- 3.33 **Evidence from Marianne Lemond, Project Manager (ML), and Elliot Klimek, Children & Youth Team Leader (EK), Allsorts.**
- 3.34 ML explained that Allsorts provides support services for LGBT and questioning young people from 11-25. Allsorts works closely with BHCC schools services.
- 3.35 ML told the panel that homo/bi/transphobic bullying can affect not only LGBT young people but also young people who are perceived as but may not in fact be LGBT, as well as people who have LGBT friends or relatives.
- 3.36 Young LGBT people who are not supported at home can be particularly vulnerable to harassment and bullying, and are likely to under-report bullying because they are worried about family reaction if they are identified as LGBT. LGBT young people with very supportive families tend to be much more resilient.
- 3.37 As well as dealing with direct bullying it is important to challenge homophobic, biphobic and trans-phobic language, and generally to foster a school environment where LGBT identities are considered normative.
- 3.38 EK told the panel that schools were typically highly gendered environments, which could be very difficult for trans or gender questioning students as being split into sexes could force them to 'out' themselves or make them otherwise uncomfortable.
- 3.39 Teachers are not necessarily as confident in challenging transphobic bullying as they are LGB bullying issues, and trans is not always included as a separate section in

school strategies, although trans issues often require an approach that is distinct from LGB approaches. In general it is the case that schools, particularly primaries, are not yet as good at dealing with trans issues as with LGB ones.

- 3.40 SB made the point that it has been a challenge to get primary schools to understand LGBT issues, and that in practice this is often driven by LGBT parents – which may be one reason why Brighton & Hove is relatively advanced in this area.
- 3.41 ML noted that Allsorts had begun to do more work with primary schools. This work includes using LGBT teenagers as mentors/trainers. As well as offering support to students, Allsorts trains teachers, other school staff, CAMHS staff, education psychologists etc. in LGBT issues.
- 3.42 In response to questions on governor training on bullying issues, SB told members that there had been some training, but that more work needed to be done in this area. However, the governor training programme is already very busy.
- 3.43 **Evidence from Paul Myszor, Senior Educational Psychologist, BHCC.**
- 3.44 Educational psychology offers a universal service into schools, focusing on children with SEN (special educational needs). This entails directly supporting young people and working with teachers and support staff to develop individual learning plans and school-wide strategies.
- 3.45 Some SEN children are typically vulnerable to bullying and can benefit from individual support to increase resilience and develop assertiveness. This can be as simple as working with a child to improve their body language, or as complex as working with children with autistic spectrum conditions to help them better understand social interactions and not interpret positively intentioned ‘banter’ as bullying.
- 3.46 Some effective interventions use a CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) model – helping individuals recognise the flashpoints that typically lead to them being bullied (or bullying) and develop coping mechanisms /more positive thought processes.
- 3.47 Other interventions may involve supporting group or whole school work – developing an understanding that bullying is not just a binary aggressor/victim relationship, but can also involve others – people defending the victim, or enabling the aggressor, or as bystanders.
- 3.48 It is important to work to an agreed definition of bullying which acknowledges that bullying is repetitive behaviour, not a one-off incident and that not all interpersonal conflict should be viewed as one person bullying another.
- 3.49 Supporting teaching staff is very important; stressed teachers tend not to be capable of effectively supporting vulnerable students, and may themselves end up resorting to bullying behaviours in the classroom.
- 3.50 Special schools require a tailored support approach – e.g. a specific focus on supporting young people with autistic spectrum conditions which may include a focus on teaching students how to behave in social situations.

- 3.51 A positive school ethos, good staff training and a high rate of staff retention are the key factors in schools developing good bullying (and more broadly SEN) policies. Where these aren't in place, there may be lots of variation in how staff deal with these issues.
- 3.52 All school staff should have basic skills in respect of bullying (e.g. being able to deliver restorative justice programmes). This can then be augmented by more specialist support, both internal and external to the school.
- 3.53 Evidence from Professor Ian Cunningham, the Self Managed Learning College.**
- 3.54 IC noted that there had been recent announcements regarding funding cuts to the College, and that these cuts would have a negative impact upon the College's work and its ability to support key groups, including children for whom mainstream school environments have proved unsuitable. IC challenged decisions to cut support and questioned what alternatives there were for young people who have been failed by mainstream schooling.
- 3.55 There is a risk that local areas may be significantly under-reporting rates of serious bullying – many parents who end up home-educating and many children who refuse to attend school may in fact do so because of bullying, but this will not necessarily be accurately recorded.
- 3.56 For many vulnerable children the large, impersonal environment of mainstream schools (especially secondaries) is a major problem – some children will only thrive in more homely small school settings.
- 3.57 For some young people the development of an individual identity may clash with the kinds of identity that mainstream schools demand of their students. Young people may cope with these pressures by establishing an identity as a bully/a tough kid etc.
- 3.58 Typical targets for bullying include children with autistic spectrum conditions, mixed-race children (a particular problem in an overwhelmingly 'white' city like Brighton & Hove), and summer-born children (who tend on average to be smaller than their peers).
- 3.59 There is a danger of over-focusing on individual resilience. Some young people may, due to their personal history or developmental needs etc, simply be incapable of developing a sufficient degree of resilience and are better supported by being placed in a more positive, caring environment.
- 3.60 The College does not set proscriptive rules in terms of on-line activity – students are allowed free access to the internet, but do meet together to agree rules for online social interaction. Technology is too inseparable from modern life to exclude it from the school environment.
- 3.61 A particular focus at the College is on peer input – both in terms of agreeing general standards of conduct and in terms of the specific behaviour of individuals. This is something that is often lacking in more mainstream environments, but being challenged by peers can have a big impact on student behaviour.

3.62 A ‘small schools’ approach can be implemented within current school structures – i.e. by setting up ‘schools within a school’. A general rule in such environments is that no teacher should directly engage with more than 80 children – the maximum number that a teacher can effectively ‘know’.

3.63 In general mixing students of different ages is a positive thing. However, Year 7 is a problematic year (i.e. the year of transition from primary to secondary education), and there may be some merit in separating Year 7 children from others in a secondary environment to smooth the transition process. (Robin Banerjee suggested that the panel might wish to look at the evidence behind a variety of approaches to managing this transition.)

3.64 Summing up from Professor Robin Banerjee (RB)

3.65 Professor Banerjee made four key points in summary:

- There’s an overall positive picture in terms of efforts to tackle bullying in Brighton & Hove but also a recognition from all witnesses that there was still some way to go

- Some groups and individuals are more vulnerable than others - we learned a lot from the witnesses about factors that make some especially vulnerable to being bullied, but we need to learn more about the factors that make some especially likely to become bullies

- Responding to bullying-related difficulties requires individual attention, not a one-size-fits-all response to the bullying label --- and cyberbullying has its own distinctive issues that need to be explored further

- Overall, prevention and intervention depend on work with the entire school community, including parents and governors as well as all staff and pupils

4. RELATED INFORMATION

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The meeting concluded at 6:15pm

Signed

Chair

Dated this

day of