

MINUTES OF MEETING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON TUESDAY, 20TH JULY, 2021

PRESENT:

Councillors: Makbule Gunes (Chair), James Chiriyankandath, Emine Ibrahim, Sarah James and Tammy Palmer

Co-opted Members: Lourdes Keever (Church representative) and KanuPriya Jhunjhunwala (Parent Governor representative)

1. FILMING AT MEETINGS

The Chair referred Members present item 1 on the agenda regarding filming at the meeting. The Panel noted the information contained therein.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dixon and Stone and Ms Denny and Ms Jakhu.

3. ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

5. DEPUTATIONS/PETITIONS/PRESENTATIONS/QUESTIONS

None.

6. MINUTES

AGREED:

That the minutes of the meeting of 8 March 2021 be approved.

7. TERMS OF REFERENCE AND MEMBERSHIP

It was noted that Youth Services and youth justice, which had previously been within the portfolio of the Cabinet Member for Communities, were both now within the portfolio of the Cabinet Member for Early Years, Children and Families. All of the areas within the terms of reference of the Panel were therefore covered by the Cabinet Member for Early Years, Children and Families.

AGREED:

1. That the terms of reference and Protocol for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and its Panels be noted; and
2. That the policy areas/remits and membership for each Scrutiny Panel for 2020/21 be noted.

8. CABINET MEMBER QUESTIONS - EARLY YEARS, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.

Councillor Zena Brabazon, the Cabinet Member for Early Years, Children and Families, reported on recent developments within her portfolio. The key priority for the administration in the coming year would be early years. Councillor Peray Ahmet, the new Leader of the Council, had made this clear and this had been well received by the community. Very young children had been severely affected by the lockdown and the long term implications could be profound. A review was taking place of early years provision with a view to strengthening it. Safeguarding and children's social care were important additional priorities. In addition, there was a lot to be done in respect of special educational needs (SEN). Of particular note was the £17 million overspend in the Delegated Schools Budget arising from the high needs block and this needed to be addressed.

School place planning was another important matter. There was currently no sign that birth rates were likely to rise and schools were therefore continuing to respond to the reduced demand for places. She paid tribute to the work that had been undertaken by the Council's Education and Public Health departments for the work that they had undertaken since March 2020 to assist schools in reopening and keeping them safe. Schools had effectively been open continuously since March 2020 and had risen very well to the challenges that they had been faced with. She had written to schools and governors to thank them for all their work.

In answer to a question, she reported that Amaze had been commissioned to review parental involvement in special educational needs and the development of a new parents forum. Their review had 59 recommendations and these were being implemented. The contract for developing the new parents forum had been awarded to the Bridge Renewal Trust and it was hoped that the new arrangements would be operational from September 2021. The Cabinet Member felt that it was important to establish the right culture, where parents were listened to and difficult things could be said without rancour. It was noted that the procurement process for the parents forum had been undertaken with input from parents. The first project for the new arrangements would to review the local offer.

In answer to another question, the Cabinet Member stated that the Bridge Renewal Trust was an established local organisation with a wide range of contacts and a good reputation. They were also being supported by an organisation called Contact, who would ensure that they learnt from best practice elsewhere.

The Panel noted that some schools were in the borough were struggling to claim for monies owed to them in respect of Education Health and Care plans for children living in neighbouring boroughs. Jackie DiFolco, Assistant Director for Early Help and

Prevention, reported that there were two ways in which the Council could assist schools who were experiencing difficulties with this. Firstly, a temporary cash flow could be agreed so that schools were able to continue with their normal activities. Secondly, the local authority that owed the money could be contacted and asked the reason for the delay in paying the school. Schools should be aware of the support that was available but could be reminded if need be.

Ms Keever reported that boroughs were not paying what they owed to schools in some cases. As a Chair of Governors, she had regularly been required to intervene to ensure payment. She felt that some boroughs were deliberately delaying payment till after the end of the financial year so that they could claim that they were no longer able to pay. Chasing up money that was owed was very time consuming for schools and the amounts involved could be substantial. They needed more support in dealing with this and the issue needed to be addressed strategically, with better communication between different boroughs. The Cabinet Member thanked her for raising the issue and stated that consideration would be given to how it could be addressed.

Ann Graham, the Director of Children's Services, stated that there was now additional capacity for her service to assist schools. They needed to know if problems were being experienced by them in obtaining payment from other boroughs so that they could escalate if necessary. Delaying tactics on the part of boroughs should not result in schools not being paid. The Assistant Directors for Early Help and Prevention and for Schools and Learning would be asked to address the issue.

In response to a question regarding the provision of independent advice and support to Chairs of school governors, the Cabinet Member stated that support to school governing bodies was the responsibility of Haringey Education Partnership (HEP). The provision of independent advice to Chairs was an interesting idea though. The need to have school governors who were able to support, challenge and advocate for their school was an important priority. It was noted that Chairs of Governors were not always receiving necessary information and agreed that the Assistant Director for Schools and Learning would take up this issue.

Panel Members welcomed the fact that early years was to become the current administration's top priority. However, it was felt that all children had been negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns and it was therefore necessary to prioritise the needs of them all. The Cabinet Member stated that she welcomed being challenged on this issue and the Council was responding to it. An extensive summer programme of activities had been arranged, which was the biggest one ever planned by the Council. Included within this were the Big Summer and the Holiday Activities and Food programmes. The latter provided free activities and a meal to children who were entitled to free school meals. The intention was to try and reach as many children as possible and to respond to the challenges that they had all faced in the last 18 months. The Director of Children's Services acknowledged that all children needed to be cared for as all had been affected. It was not fully clear what the long term impact would be. She felt that the holiday programme was one way to address the effects of what had happened.

In answer to another question, the Cabinet Member stated that change could often take a long time to implement. There had been a particular need to change the Council's approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and this was now proceeding with the adoption of a new strategy. Children's social care was a major priority but there was a need to focus on other issues as well. SEND had close links to Early Years and earlier intervention could lead to better outcomes. There was a huge focus on school attainment and particularly that of BAME young people. This was being addressed in partnership with HEP and schools. There was a focus on change and she wished to nurture a culture within children and young people's services which was open to new ideas.

The Panel noted that support to refugee and asylum seeker children was included within the Panel's terms of reference. Ms Graham reported that a lot of work was undertaken by her service to support such children, especially by the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) team. In respect of unaccompanied minors, the pattern for arrivals had changed recently with children arriving by boat rather than in vehicles. A new system for providing for their care was due to go live shortly. It was noted that a review had been undertaken by the Panel in 2017/18 on support to children from refugee families and agreed that a further update on progress with the implementation of the recommendations be provided to a future meeting.

In answer to a question, Ms Graham reported that the Annual Report on children's social care was currently being drafted and would be available in October. This would include detail on progress and future challenges. In answer to another question, the Cabinet Member reported that discussions were beginning regarding the budget for next year. Partners would be consulted as part of this process, including health. They had a shared interest in achieving good outcomes and additional financial contributions in recognition of this would be welcome.

AGREED:

1. That the issue of delayed payments to schools in respect of EHC plans be referred to the Assistant Directors for Early Help and Prevention and for Schools and Learning to address and to raise with relevant boroughs; and
2. That an update on support to children from refugee and asylum seeker families and further progress on the scrutiny review regarding this be submitted to a future meeting of the Panel.

9. YOUTH SERVICES

Ms DiFolco reported on the range of youth services that were currently provided, which included both universal and targeted work. There was a lot of outreach work in the community and this often also involved partners, such as the Police and schools. Mental health had been a key focus and not just because of the effects of the pandemic. There had also been projects on a wide range of other subjects, including gardening, media, self-defence and music. In addition, there had also been specific programmes aimed at vulnerable young people such as young carers and autistic young people.

The pandemic had had a significant effect on participation, reducing numbers attending by two thirds. A virtual offer had been developed in response and, in addition, targeted face-to-face work had continued. Outreach and subsequently small group work had followed and the amount of face-to-face work was now being increased.

She highlighted some examples of good practice:

- Project Future was funded by Comic Relief and co-produced with young people. It involved a clinical and an assistant psychologist being based at the Bruce Grove Youth Centre and working to support the mental health needs of young men;
- A Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PHSE) education programme had been developed for schools that covered a range of issues including transitions, on line safety and substance misuse; and
- Seminars had been provided for parents and professionals on a range of relevant topics.

She reported that the service had five priorities for the forthcoming year:

- Working with the National Youth Agency (NYA) to develop hard and soft outcome measures on the impact of their interventions;
- Developing co-design in the planning and shaping of services;
- Increasing the number of young people in education, employment and training;
- Progressing significant capital projects, including the refurbishment of Bruce Grove Youth Centre and the opening of the new Wood Green Youth Hub, which was due to open next year; and
- Securing longer term funding for a larger proportion of the service's work.

In answer to a question, Ms DiFolco stated that the work with NYA was focussed upon the development of hard impact measures, such as impact on referrals, levels of anti-social behaviour and mental health. These would supplement the softer measures that were already in place across much of the service. Relevant performance data would be included in future reports when fully developed. In respect of work with girls, she reported that there was a Girls Group and agreed to circulate details of their work to the Panel.

AGREED:

That further information on specific work undertaken by the Youth Service aimed at girls be circulated to the Panel.

10. COVID 19 - IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Ms Graham reported that the events of the last 18 months had been unprecedented. Prior to the first lockdown, which began on 20 March 2020, the service had been encouraging staff to work from home where possible. Work had previously been normally undertaken on a face-to-face basis and changing this had been challenging. The full impact of the lockdowns would not be known for some time. She was mindful that some children had been born during a lockdown and had been deprived of early socialisation, with impacts on the development of language and social skills. Other children had been affected by mental health issues or bereavement.

Normal Ofsted inspections had not been able to take place and temporarily replaced by remote assurance visits to ensure that local authorities were continuing to safeguard and deliver outcomes for children. Ofsted inspectors were offered to local authorities and Haringey had collaborated with other north central London boroughs to obtain the input of several of them, who had produced a useful report on the impact of lockdown on children.

It had been known that some families struggled with poverty, including access to digital services, but the number that had been affected had been more than anticipated and not just amongst those known to the Council. Responses had been required for all children irrespective of whether they had been previously known. It had been established that food security was also not as strong as previously thought and systems had needed to be put in place to address this, including provision of food parcels. There were concerns about the level of domestic abuse and it was known that many families lived in cramped conditions. Poverty and family stress were also major issues and, whilst these were most prevalent in the east, they had also spread to the west of the borough.

Nick Hewlett, Principal Adviser for Early Years, reported that the impact on the youngest children could not be underestimated. The childcare sector had been massively affected and most childcare facilities forced to close. Only local authority and a few private nurseries had remained open. However, the Council had been able to offer childcare to every parent or carer that had asked for it. Childcare facilities had now re-opened. There were still the same number of nurseries but not all childminders had survived. Parents had experienced isolation during lockdown and children had been deprived of much of the social interaction that they would normally have. There was now a major focus on addressing this and especially speech and language development. An Early Years Strategy was now being developed and these issues would be taken up as part of it. Children Centres had been able to provide support to vulnerable families throughout the whole of the pandemic. It was hoped to be able to provide a more extensive offer from the autumn onwards.

Ms Riordan reported that it had been necessary to embed remote education very quickly after the first lockdown. Collaborative work with schools had ensured that provision was strong. The National Foundation for Education Research had estimated that the average amount of learning lost was three months but this was likely to be more for the most disadvantaged of children. Schools had remained open for vulnerable children and children of key workers. However, there were difficulties in delivering education in such circumstances such as the need to maintain social distancing and attendance had only been on a part time basis for most. School attendance levels had been low and Haringey's figures were in line of those elsewhere.

A considerable effort had been made to ensure that children had access to laptops and a large number had been distributed. In addition, a large number of free school meals had been provided, including during school holidays. There had also been a school holiday and food programme and, in addition, an extensive summer programme was planned for this year. The government had allocated £1.4 billion for education recovery and this included £1 billion for tutoring, which would be delivered through schools and colleges.

Beverly Hendricks, Assistant Director of Safeguarding and Social Care, reported that there had been a considerable impact on social care. Initially, there had been concerns regarding vulnerable children not being able to attend hospital appointments and not getting into school. Work had taken place through Haringey Safeguarding Children's Partnership (HSCP) to set up systems to provide support. The first three weeks after the initial lockdown had been focussed on ensuring that children had access to basic needs, such as housing and food. Following this, approximately 1,000 children were identified as requiring particular attention. A system to monitor relevant data on a daily basis was set up. Work was also undertaken with HSCP to provide for face-to-face contact by partners of the most vulnerable children and there was collective responsibility for ensuring the children remained safe. An Early Help Panel was established to target early intervention and a system of daily contact with the most vulnerable families established. There were a lot of lessons to be learnt from what had happened and, in particular, the need to mobilise quickly. The response had demonstrated the strength of partnership work in the borough.

The Panel raised the issue of authorisation of school absences of those young people who were clinically extremely vulnerable or had parents who were. Ms Riordan reported that Education Welfare Officers had been in communication with schools regarding how such absences were marked as many children in such a situation had stayed away when schools had reopened. The Council had been clear that schools should not be punitive and guidance and support had been provided. The expectation was that schools would treat each case on its individual merits, with education provided either within school or remotely. She was happy to take up any individual cases where there had been problems.

Panel Members expressed concern regarding the funding that the government had made available to enable children to catch up on lost learning through the provision of tutoring. Ms Riordan commented that there were constraints on the use of such funding and schools had to use tutors from an approved list. Schools were working creatively to make the best use of the funding that was available and to make sure that all children were able to get back on track after the disruptions that had taken place. She would be able to provide further detail of what was planned by schools outside of the meeting. In answer to a question regarding the future provision of free school meal vouchers in school holidays, she stated that this would need to be a decision for Members to take. In particular, funding would need to be identified. She highlighted the work that many schools were already undertaking through food and toy banks to support the children from the most deprived families in the borough. The Cabinet Member reported that Cabinet agreed to fund an extension of free schools to defined groups of primary school pupils who were not currently eligible for free school meals from Summer Term 2021 for two years. More work was required on this issue and it was possible that additional funding would be required in due course. Due to the impact of the pandemic, there were also more children who were entitled to free school meals than previously. Further consideration would be needed on the issue as part of the setting of priorities within the Council's budget.

Ms Hendricks commented that poverty of experience also needed to be addressed. A lot of work had been undertaken by the service collaboratively with partner agencies including the voluntary and third sector, such as the Bridge Renewal Trust and the

Tottenham Hotspur Foundation, to address this at the peak of the pandemic and as part of the easing measures. This had included a programme of meaningful activities that was offered during school holidays. In addition, the Virtual School had been expanded to include young people over the age of 16 that had been affected by lost learning. She agreed to circulate a note to Panel Members providing further detail on what had worked well and where further work was required.

In answer to a question regarding missing children, Ms Graham reported that she was happy to bring a report to a future meeting. In respect of staffing issues, she stated that there had been nothing exceptional in the levels of staff sickness or leaving the Council. However, some staff had been ill with Covid or had been required to self-isolate. Others had suffered bereavements and, in addition, been absent due to other health issues. Staff were nevertheless tired and this was mirrored amongst partners such as Health and the Police. It had been particularly hard for staff to get a break during the first year of the pandemic. Staff had generally shown a high degree of resilience. Their work was a vocation and staff were committed to the welfare of children and young people. In respect of food poverty, she stated that the Council responded to all families that were referred to them as being in need. The Cabinet Member stated that there was a need for a long term strategy for food and consideration was being given to this.

In answer to a question regarding digital safety, Ms Graham reported that every device that was given to children complied with school and Council safety standards. Ms Riordan commented that schools took the training of parents and carers on cyber security very seriously and the issue was also covered in PHSE classes. In respect of the physical health and fitness of children and young people, the Panel noted that schools took part in a range of initiatives, such as Run the Mile and the Spring Stride.

Michele Wong, a local resident, raised the issue of ventilation in schools and how this impacted on the transmission of Covid-19, which was mainly transmitted through the air. She stated that there was a build-up of aerosols indoors when windows were closed and there was insufficient ventilation. In such an environment, there was no safe distance as the aerosols hung in the air and this was particularly true when masks were not worn. There was a need for frequent changes of air to ensure that schools were safe and most did not currently have the mechanical means to ensure that this happened. Ventilation was quantifiable and 46 air changes per hour were needed to ensure safety. CO2 monitors could be used to measure levels. It would be particularly difficult for schools to remain safe during the winter, when it became too cold to leave windows open. It would therefore be necessary for schools to have supplementary means of ventilation in place. Although children were at lower risk from Covid than others in the population, they were at risk of developing long Covid. She felt that current risk assessments were inadequate as they did not provide for input from a mechanical engineer. She was clinically vulnerable and was there was concern amongst many parents regarding Covid transmission in schools. It was important that schools protected pupils and staff. She had already been in touch with Catherine West, MP for Hornsey and Wood Green, and the Assistant Director for Schools and Learning. It was agreed that Ms Wong's presentation be circulated to the Panel and that the Assistant Director for Schools and Learning be requested to respond to the points raised within it.

AGREED:

1. That the Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care be requested to circulate a note to Panel Members providing further detail on what had worked well in the response by the service to the Covid pandemic and where further work was required; and
2. That the PowerPoint presentation from Ms Wong regarding ventilation in schools be circulated to the Panel and that the Assistant Director for Schools and Learning be requested to respond to the points raised within it.

11. WORK PROGRAMME 2021-22

The Panel noted that it had been proposed that the Annual Youth Justice Plan and the SEND Strategy be added to the work plan. However, it there was currently very little space available within the proposed agendas for each remaining meeting of the year. It would therefore be necessary to take some items off the agendas for remaining meetings in order to accommodate additional items.

AGREED:

That further discussion on the workplan for the remaining meetings for the year take place between the Chair and relevant officers ahead of the next Panel meeting.

CHAIR: Councillor Makbule Gunes

Signed by Chair

Date

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