

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee - 25 November 2024

Minutes of the meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 25 November 2024 at 7.00 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Ozdemir (Chair), Bossman-Quarshie (Vice-Chair), Cinko-Oner, Jegorovas-Armstrong, McHugh, Ogunro, Pandor, Zammit, Susie Graves (Co-Optee), Mary Clement (Co-Optee), McNeill (Co-Optee) and Turpin (Co-Optee)

Also Present: **Councillors:** Safi-Ngongo

Councillor Gulcin Ozdemir in the Chair

42 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

There were no apologies for absence.

43 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

44 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)

There were no declarations of interest.

45 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)

Members sought a correction to the minutes, for it to state that officers had confirmed that the PRU was to be incorporated into the committee's work programme.

RESOLVED:

That subject to the amendment above, the minutes of the meeting held on 22nd October be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

46 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)

The Chair outlined that a programme of evidence gathering sessions as part of the committee's review into persistent absence in secondary school would continue into the new year.

47 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A6)

Public Questions were received and answered during the discussion of the relevant agenda item(s).

48 JOINT PROTOCOL ON SECTION 17 FAMILIES (Item D1)

The Director of Housing Operations was in attendance to present the protocol and take questions, in addition to the Executive Member for Children, Young People & Families and officers from the Children & Young People service. In the discussion, the following points were raised:

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- The Joint Protocol on Section 17 Families had been developed between the Homes & Neighbourhoods and Children & Young People directorates. The protocol was put to the Homes and Communities Scrutiny Committee for comment and was endorsed at their meeting of 14th October 2024 and had now come to this committee for comment and endorsement.
- There were currently 1568 homeless households in temporary accommodation, the highest ever amount. 889 of them had children, equivalent to 57% of all homeless families in temporary accommodation have children.
- In addition, 1404 children were living in temporary accommodation that Islington provides and 640 children were within the borough. Islington was probably the highest in London in terms of the percentage that were still living in the borough and the third lowest in London in terms of the number of children living in temporary accommodation. It was sometimes necessary to place children and their families outside of the borough due to factors such as escaping domestic abuse, but moving families to remote locations was not routine. It was currently policy to move families to within a ninety-minute commute of the borough and most families living outside the borough were within neighbouring London boroughs such as Waltham Forest, Haringey and Enfield.
- The protocol had been drafted in partnership with Children's Services. There had been wide consultation including with partner agencies and a cross-party parliamentary group on temporary accommodation.
- The Chartered Institute on Housing had recommended Islington's approach as best practice to other local authorities
- The protocol sought to place homeless families with children as the focus and ensure an empathetic, holistic approach to meeting their needs.
- A commitment had been made to not use bed and breakfasts to house homeless households unless it was a critical emergency.
- Islington was the first local authority to mandate providers to have cots available for children.
- Officers stated that there was free WiFi was available in all Islington council properties and officers were seeking to extend this to other properties, including in the private rented sector outside of the borough.
- Officers stated that there were more homeless families with children than there were available council or housing association properties and no affordable options for them within the private rented sector. This, compounded with rents increasing on average by 15%, indicated the severity of the housing crisis.
- In response to members questions regarding information sharing when families moved to neighbouring borough, specifically for those on Child In Need plans, officers advised that a Section 17 CIN assessment was often done in collaboration with all parties, such as education, housing, and health and social care etc, and the Council was under legal obligation to notify the incoming local authority of the family and ensure the family's information travelled with them. Officers stated though that the challenge was if the incoming local authority didn't agree that the child met their threshold for a social worker, as Islington could not influence other boroughs' assessments. Officers stated though that despite that, Islington would nonetheless engage with the new local authority, ensuring the family was linked in with local services and escalating matters on their behalf. Islington would also continue to try to house the family back within the borough.
- The average time to be offered permanent accommodation was ten months.
- In response to questions from members concerning how the banding criteria took account of SEND families and families that were too sick to work, officers stated that the banding criteria was subject to review in new year in partnership with members. The review included the ninety-minute commute which had originally been stipulated because it was the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) determination of a

reasonable commute for jobseekers. Officers further clarified that homeless families had to be found secure accommodation as close as possible to the borough, by law.

- Officers confirmed that they did move tenants that were under occupying Council tenancies to more suitable properties when requested. Officers also reiterated that there would be a restructure in Housing services in which the numbers of properties that staff were responsible for, would reduce from approximately 2,000 to approximately 561. This would allow enable plans for officers to undertake routine home visits, community surgeries and annual audits, in which the welfare of tenants can be monitored and requests for downsizing picked up.
- Members noted that officers needed to be mindful of sensitive periods in young people's lives, such as exams, six months to exams and transitions between education phases, and questioned whether there was scope to recognise these more formally within the temporary accommodation process, in conjunction with education experts. In response, officers stated they recognised the impact of temporary accommodation on young people, but that the housing market was so volatile that young people's housing circumstances could change before such a designation is applied. Officers also shared members' concerns about families travelling long distances from their temporary accommodation for the young person to attend school.
- In response to members' questions about whether Housing staff were trained in trauma informed practice, officers confirmed that training was provided.
- In response to members' concerns about the possibility of tenants being offered accommodation that posed a safeguarding risk, officers advised that the Council uses a corporate procurement exercise to select its letting agencies and landlords and where a resident believes that their accommodation is unsuitable, officers would move the tenant immediately to a more appropriate placement. This would then be followed up with an inspection of the property and discussions with letting partner/landlord as to why it was not suitable.
- 47% of homeless applications were from vulnerable people, and this captured those families with individuals that had either been professionally or self-diagnosed with special educational needs.

ACTION

Officers in Housing Operations service to consult the Housing and Communities Scrutiny Committee and the CYP scrutiny committee on the outcome of the 12-month review of the new housing allocations scheme before any changes are made to the housing allocations scheme. This review will be completed during April 2025 (12 months since the new housing allocations came into operation).

ACTION:

Officers to share granular performance data with committee members, including the waiting time for families in temporary accommodation and outliers to the ten-month average; the number of families in temporary accommodation; the number of downsizing requests for Council tenancies and how long it is taking to resolve; how many families there were in temporary accommodation with children on Education, Health & Care Plans and/or awaiting a statement of SEND; and data on under occupancy, subject to discussion with the Chair.

RESOLVED:

That the Joint Protocol on Section 17 Families is endorsed by the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee.

The Chair clarified that this item was brought to committee at their request, following feedback members had received from special guardians about levels of support available to them. The Chair stated that the consideration of this item this evening was to determine whether it required further oversight as part of the committee's work programme, but that due to time constraints, intended to adjourn this item to a future meeting of the committee.

RESOLVED

That this item is adjourned to a future meeting of the committee.

50

ATTENDANCE CODES - VERBAL UPDATE (NO PAPERS) (Item D3)

The Chair opened the item by stating that it had been brought to committee in light of the work being conducted by officers regarding the new codes and was an update of the work undertaken to date to inform schools.

- Officers stated that statutory guidance had been received in September 2024 which included a revised set of attendance codes. Of the 34 codes, 12 were new.
- Officers stated that the updated codes provided greater flexibility in recording attendance and allowed schools to differentiate authorised and unauthorised absences more effectively.
- Officers stated that many codes now had sub types allowing for more accurate coding.
- In the category for when students were attending a place other than school, but statistically present the only new code was the K code and all others remained unchanged.
- The B code had been retitled to specifically include reference to attending other approved supervised activity. Officers stated this was because of historical misuse nationally, wherein some schools were assigning students work to complete at home without supervision.
- Officers stated there were three new codes in the leave of absence category, including C1 which was for pupils participating in regulated performance or regulated employment abroad. Previously this would have just been coded C. J1 was a sub code for the purposes for attending interview for employment or another education institution. The C2 code was for a part time or reduced timetable of some description.
- The T code had been generalised to now refer to parents travelling for occupational purposes.
- Officers stated there were also new codes for pupils unable to attend for unavoidable causes, with seven underneath the Q code, replacing the single Y code.
- Officers stated that nationally there had been research on listening and learning from parents in the attendance crisis, from which a key finding was that there had been a relationship breakdown between schools and families, primarily attributed to the accuracy of school attendance data at end of the school year. Officers stated that while Islington should endeavour to ensure there was greater accuracy in the recording of attendance, it was not the fault of schools, who were following the DfE guidance.
- Officers stated as an example, that schools would previously have to code a student absent for the entire morning, when a student may have only missed an hour of school, but that it was now at schools' discretion for pupils to be marked present from when they arrive at school and override the codes. This primarily affected those with early morning appointments who would have previously been marked absent for the morning for missing registration, as opposed to those that had mid-morning or mid-afternoon appointments and would be counted as present. Officers further

stated that being marked as present affected a pupil's attendance rate, regardless of whether the absence was authorised, but it could be that children with regular CAMHS appointments were accessing appointments that may facilitate their education to begin with, adding to the strain in relations between families and schools.

- Officers confirmed that at both primary and secondary schools, children that arrived after registers have closed without reason, would be assigned a U code for unauthorised absence and that this remained unchanged with the revised guidance. It was clarified that what the code revision sought to address was where children were being inadvertently punished for absences beyond their control and to make the statistics more accurate.
- In response to members questions regarding benchmarking, officers stated that as part of the statutory guidance, local authorities are required to provide targeted support meeting termly to schools and that officers were looking at the process to ensure it was consistent, regardless of who was present. Officers further stated that they were conducting two visits a day between now and the end of term regarding the revised attendance codes.
- The Chair asked if there was a possibility that the absence data could be cross-referenced to pick up on themes such as young carers and parental mental health.
- In response to members questions regarding whether schools could give amnesties to students commuting from further afield, officers stated that under the revised guidance schools were being asked to use their judgement and discretion in each individual circumstance. Officers stated that there were codes to cover transport issues and circumstances beyond the student's control, but not specifically for homelessness or temporary accommodation.
- In response to questions for the public regarding schools not marking children as unwell for mental health without consultants letters, officers stated that there was not a blanket approach to the marking of absences, that under the statutory guidance it was for the headteachers to determine what was an authorised or unauthorised absence and that the local authority was only in a position to advise schools.
- In response to questions from the public regarding mental health and wellbeing support being captured within the scrutiny review, the Chair advised that it was within the committee's work programme to speak with these support services and young people directly.
- In response to questions from the public regarding whether the use of attendance codes was a matter that could be escalated to the local authority, officers stated that there were regular meetings between the local authority and school leaders and that there was no blanket approach but that if there was a public perception that these codes were widely being misused locally, then those views would be shared with leaders.

RESOLVED

That the update is noted.

51

SCHOOL ORGANISATION VERBAL UPDATE (NO PAPERS) (Item D4)

Officers delivered a verbal update on the School Organisation plan. In the update and discussion, the following points were raised:

- Officers stated that the Council was in the consultation period on proposals regarding the future of two of the borough's primary schools as part of Phase Three of the School Organisation plan. These were Highbury Quadrant Primary School and St Jude's & St Paul's Primary School. As of this meeting there had been approximately 150 representations for Highbury Quadrant and approximately 100 for

St Jude's & St Paul's. Following the consultation there would be a report capturing the data, which would then help to shape the recommendations that the Executive will decide upon in February 2025.

- Officers stated that Phase Three had a focus on reducing surplus places across the school estate and that London faced serious challenges in education space as a result of lower birth rates, falling rolls and the housing crisis. Officers stated that data from the Greater London Authority (GLA) indicated that inner London would continue to face significant challenges on school place surpluses, a reverse on previous generations where there had not been enough school places.
- Officers stated that there was an average of 20% surplus places in primary estate and the pressures were moving into the secondary estate, and that on average each surplus place equated to approximately £6,000 of funding being lost, as DfE funding was on a per-child basis. Officers stated that they would have to consider whether schools could then afford the resources to ensure that students' school experiences were as positive as possible.
- Members noted that they appreciated the clarity in which the consultations explained how the schools were chosen for this phase.
- In response to members questions regarding whether there was more proposals for Phase Three, officers confirmed that only this proposal was the only initiative earmarked for decision.
- In response to questions about lessons learned from Phases One and Two, specifically on communication, the Executive Member stated that many lessons had been taken onboard, and that given no school had been closed in the borough for over twenty years, was a learning curve for all involved, and feedback had informed an even more collaborative and inclusive approach to this phase.
- Officers stated that while there had been changes in the Department for Education (DfE) and regarding SEND, no additional funding had been granted for schools overall. Officers reiterated that in the outcome that schools are closed, the funding follows the child to their new education provision, including specialist provisions.
- Members stated that previous phases had been a traumatic process which notably affected headteachers, governors and staff as well as families and asked as to what was being done to further support them and include them within the process. In response, the Executive Member stated that proposals within each phase of the School Organisation plan were a last resort following months of informal engagement to find a solution to avoid this process, and that it was not the Council's goal to close its schools. Further to the Executive Member's response, officers stated that there was learning with each phase, but that there would inevitably be a feeling of hurt where a school had to be considered as part of a proposal within the plan. Officers reiterated the Executive Member's response that they tried to mitigate such measures early and informally, but that ultimately, they were following the framework mandated by the Department for Education (DfE).
- Officers stated that planning groups were kept together to ensure children not having to travel too far to new provisions.
- In response to questions from members regarding why closure was a proposal instead of amalgamation, officers stated that the purpose of informal consultation was to canvas views and that further consideration would be given to what is proposed before a final recommendation is made to the Council's Executive.

- Members asked for clarification regarding the situation with Samuel Rhodes School. In response, officers confirmed that the pupil numbers had reduced to such that it the school approached officers to report a change of need. Officers then stated that it was deemed possible to accommodate the school's pupils within the provisions elsewhere in the borough, specifically Richard Cloudesley, which met the needs of these children.
- Officers clarified that within the current DfE framework, local authorities were not in a position to open new schools.
- Officers stated that Islington had 1% of its SEND children access the non maintained sector out of the borough, compared with 8% nationally. Islington was said to have among the highest percentage of SEND students overall, nationally, but officers stated that Islington had a very competitive offer that compared favourably, in terms of SEND places in the maintained sector for SEND places. Officers also stated that Islington was one of the few local authorities to practice improvement partners.
- Members expressed that lived experiences should be considered alongside the data, and noted that they didn't feel sufficient data was available on SEND to consider next steps.

ACTION

Officers to invite members to the SEND roundtable discussion in December 2024.

ACTION

Officers to incorporate the work of the PRU in its provision to the Alternative Provision item on the committee's work programme.

ACTION

Officers to share with members the DfE guidance on opening/closing schools.

RESOLVED

That the update is noted.

52

QUARTER 1 PERFORMANCE REPORT (Item D5)

Officers presented the Quarter One performance report to members. In the discussion, the following points were raised:

- Members noted that Islington had significant numbers of students in elective home education in addition to having a high rate of persistent absence and sought a breakdown of the reasons behind why families were choosing to electively home educate and the EOTAS (Education other than at School) figure for Islington as had been requested previously. Members further stated that while the COVID-19 Pandemic had been attributable to the rise in EHE numbers previously, that there were other factors to consider such as children being undiagnosed or families not having found a suitable school for the child's needs.
- Officers confirmed that while the local authority had to respect parent choice on elective home education but that where safeguarding issues were present, would intervene and that a child on a protection plan would need local authority consent to be electively home educated. Officers further stated that they had to work within the policy framework set out by the government but that there had been policy shifts

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including discussions of an electively home educated register, and that if members would like further information that it should be added to the forward plan.

- In response to members questions regarding whether the phonics initiative was tallied with the SATs results, officers advised that when the full School Results were published, they would break down the data as many ways as possible as per members' request.
- Members noted an oversight in which the youth provision only referred to that at Rose Bowl Youth Hub, which officers acknowledged.
- In response to members questions about how Islington would replace single-word judgements and communicate how well the borough's schools were performing, officers stated that there was a regular programme of engagement with school leaders to identify a consistent and common approach, and would be working with them to find a local solution.
- In response to public questions concerning how the committee would engage with groups that had disproportionately high absence rates, the Chair advised that evidence gathering sessions were scheduled as part of the committee's review into persistent absence in secondary schools.
- Officers thanked the public for their engagement with the work of SEND Parliament and Parent Carer Forum.

ACTION

Officers to provide a breakdown on Electively Home Educated students, and the overall EOTAs figures for Islington.

ACTION:

Officers to provide data on school visits to/from Libraries for the next quarterly report.

RESOLVED

That the report is noted.

53

WORK PROGRAMME 2024-25 (Item D6)

The Chair informed members and officers that an item on Alternative Provision was to be brought to the committee's meeting of 24th February. This was originally scheduled to be a standalone meeting, but had been postponed for members to agree on the data that they would like to see in advance.

RESOLVED:

That the 2024-25 Work Programme be noted.

The meeting ended at 9.52 pm

CHAIR