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London Borough of Islington

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Tuesday, 26 January 2021

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday, 26 January 2021 at 7.00 pm.

Present:	Councillors:	Cutler (Chair), Ozdemir (Vice-Chair), Bell-Bradford, Caluori, Williamson and Woolf
Also Present:	Councillors	Councillor Ngongo
	Co-opted Member	Mary Clement, Roman Catholic Diocese Claire Ballak, Parent Governor Representative (Primary)

Councillor Vivien Cutler in the Chair

221 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. A1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Graham and Zaleera Wallace.

222 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. A2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

223 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. A3)

There were no declarations of interest.

224 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (ITEM NO. A4)

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 December 2020 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.
- 2) That the Chair identify questions that still required a response and would send these to officers.

225 CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. A5)

The Chair reflected on both the UK passing 100,000 deaths from COVID and the fatal stabbing of a young person in Islington on 25 January.

The Chair also stated that the majority of witness evidence on the COVID-19 recovery scrutiny review had now been collected. Every member had been involved in some way. Councillor Ngongo and Ozdemir were thanked for arranging the evidence gathering session with members of the BAME community and officers were thanked for arranging the meeting with headteachers.

226 ITEMS FOR CALL IN (IF ANY) (ITEM NO. A6)

None.

227 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. A7)**

None.

228 **COVID-19 SCRUTINY REVIEW EVIDENCE (ITEM NO. B1)**

Councillor Cutler gave a presentation on the evidence gathered from children, young people and adults to date. In the presentation and discussion the following main points were made:

- The meetings were undertaken in November and December 2020 and unlike in previous years, it was not possible to have face-to-face discussion or see the children and young people in their schools or settings. All discussions took place virtually.
- It proved impossible to arrange any meetings with primary schools pupils or their parents/carers other than incidentally in the Black, Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) Community Group discussion. It would have been useful to speak to primary school pupils or their parents/carers and, as a result of not being able to, the evidence was slightly imbalanced.
- In three of out of the five meetings, the number of participants was in single figures.
- There had been some technical problems with Zoom meetings.
- As the meetings took place in November and December 2020, the impact of the most recent lockdown was not captured.
- The meetings that took place were as follows:
 - Year 10 students at a secondary school and a senior member of staff
 - parents whose children attended an early years children's centre
 - Year 12 and 13 students and some staff from the Upward Bound project (an education project aimed at raising attainment for young people attending Islington schools and organised by Islington Council in partnership with London Metropolitan University)
 - members of the BAME Community Group (comprising community organisation and supplementary school leaders and some parents)
 - a member of the Children's Active Involvement Service (CAIS) group and an officer. CAIS is a group for care experienced and looked after young people.
- Both groups of students had found lockdown difficult. Reasons for this included a lack of routine, no interactive or face-to-face lessons, little feedback from teachers and anxiety about the virus. Some young people had barely left home since the start of lockdown. The extent of Year 10 students' learning was often dependent on parental encouragement.

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- Only one student had no access to a Chromebook or laptop but used his iPhone.
- The Year 10 group was worried about not sitting GCSEs; Year 12 and 13s raised concerns about missing exams and a lack of confidence in teacher assessment. The Upward Bound group had received their grades and most felt that they had been marked down. One student was concerned about being marked up as this meant now being expected to be working at a higher base level.
- The Upward Bound group found the pastoral support they were offered helpful.
- Parents from the BAME Community Group identified additional challenges such as a lack of resources and space to study, concerns about spreading the virus in intergenerational households and the difficulties of coping with children who had special and additional needs.
- Community leaders stated they lacked sufficient space, funding for teachers and IT devices to offer a broad curriculum and they were worried about sustainability.
- The chair of CAIS had raised the concerns of members. Some were isolated in university halls of residence, some were trying to get into training or employment and there was a lot of uncertainty. There was a request for more clarity around support for post-16s to access the jobs market.
- For some young people, the unavailability of adult and/or emotional support was a challenge. There was a need for better and timely communications to prepare them for a different kind of support in a pandemic.
- The early years parents were very happy with Bright Start online newsletters and activities for children and parents/carers. They requested more information on and reminders of events online. They also commented on how lockdown had meant they could not use the parks which had impacted on socialisation.
- A member reiterated that the reason more evidence could not be gathered from schools was that there had been a significantly increased workload as a result of COVID-19.
- In response to a question from a member of the public about the Year 10 student who had not had a device to work on other than his phone, the chair replied that the school had since received more devices. An officer stated that if this young person was identified, they would ensure he had received one.
- A member of the public asked whether libraries could be used in the future to distribute materials. She raised concerns about a lack of digital inclusivity and additional support being required for Black Caribbean and White British boys eligible for free school meals as well as parents of SEND students. The Chair stated that the next presentation would include details of what schools were doing for SEND students. An officer advised that Chromebooks had been distributed and he was confident that all Year 10 and Year 11 students from last year had all the resources they needed. A bid had been put into the Dame Alice Owen

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Foundation for more devices. In total over 3,000 devices had been distributed and almost every secondary pupil had a device and every family with primary school children had at least one device. Another officer stated that 100 brand new books would be distributed to each of the 12 supplementary schools. These included picture books, short stories and longer ones.

- Families having access to a device meant they were able to join a library and access online books.
- It was hoped that if a bid for more devices was successful, gaps in device provision could be filled and there could be staggered provision for Year 5, 4, 3 and 2 children so that they could each have their own device.
- An officer stated that there had been supply chain issues in the government laptop scheme. While waiting for these, those provided by charities had been distributed as well as those purchased directly by the local authority.

Councillor Cutler gave a presentation on the evidence gathered from the Headteachers Panel. In the presentation and discussion the following main points were made:

- When asked which demographics had been most affected by lockdown, the headteachers advised that everyone had been impacted. In general, there had been the greatest impact on;
 - working families
 - single parents
 - families with more than three children
 - those with SEND children
 - those who had 'fallen through the cracks' and had low income
 - those who were on zero hours contracts
 - those who had little money for resources
 - those with No Recourse to Public Funds
 - those with no quiet space for children to learn
 - those with no access to IT devices or had connectivity issues
- Concern was raised, too, about those who were hard to reach and parents wanting to home educate them.
- Headteachers were of the view that schools should be given more discretion to interpret 'vulnerable' in relation to children that could attend during lockdown. A headteacher of a special school had stated that it should not be assumed that every child with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) was vulnerable as many received support and with this support they should no longer be classed as vulnerable. This headteacher had also raised concern that the DfE had not considered special schools sufficiently when issuing updates in relation to the COVID pandemic.
- There had been a digital divide in the first lockdown and schools and the council had had to buy many devices, SIM cards, dongles etc. There was a lack of devices in many homes and some parents lacked an

understanding of IT. Where there was more than one child, the older child was often prioritised over younger ones to use the device.

- Remote learning hit the youngest children and SEND children the hardest. Vulnerable children also struggled.
- Some parents were concerned about the amount of screen time remote learning required and had asked schools for paper packs. Some schools let parents collect packs twice a week.
- Some schools, however, had managed to obtain 95% pupil attendance in remote learning.
- Teachers had become much more skilled at delivering remote learning and there had been a positive impact on pedagogy.
- When considering the impact of lockdown on SEND children, it was important to remember that each child was unique. Often school was a challenge to them. Those at home frequently preferred to work on paper. They could also struggle with a lack of routine. Those with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) attending school in lockdown liked the smaller classes, less noise and more personal attention.
- A headteacher commented that there was a need to ensure that all SEND children were thriving not just surviving.
- The headteacher of a special school stated that, although there had been some loss of learning for children, many had developed new life skills with their parents and carers during lockdown and had developed holistically.
- There had been changes in mental health between lockdowns.
- Early years leaders had raised concern about anxiety. There was more separation anxiety in babies and parents; staff were affected by this, too.
- Younger children required social relationships and parent surveys revealed high levels of adverse mental health in them as well as their children.
- Some Year 11s lacked resilience and were unmotivated.
- Bereavement was very hard for everyone; children were often concerned about catching COVID and spreading it to family members or the community.
- Most children and young people were glad to be back at school. A few children had become 'lost to the system' with parents choosing to home educate them. However, these children had now re-entered the system.
- It was important to minimise pressure on children on their return to school and build on their learning rather than referring to 'catching up'.
- Priorities for re-opening and beyond included:
 - rethinking teachers styles
 - supporting staff
 - optimising resources to support the most vulnerable
 - developing digital capacity and skills further to enhance all learning
 - appealing to the government for more support in particular for SEND students
 - developing digital capacity further
 - encouraging socialisation, flexibility, resilience
 - creating fun activities and developing 'qualities for happiness'.

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- On the whole, there were positive responses about support from the council. The council had taken a holistic view across the 0-18 age range, providing support for devices for the disadvantaged, 11 x 11 materials and 100 hours of World of Work programmes.
- Headteachers commended Children's Social Care, Safeguarding and Public Health. They also stated that sometimes external agencies were less effective in fulfilling their obligations and would not assess/talk to children in schools.
- Arrangements around school closures were difficult for headteachers and messaging was not always timely. Consultation and clear direction were required during this time. An officer responded that officers had to wait for government guidance and government changes had to be presented to heads very quickly.
- There could be more awareness of the needs of leadership teams and new senior staff and more practical support could be offered.
- The headteacher of a special school said that in terms of support from the council to special schools, when compared to other boroughs, Islington performed well.
- The secondary headteachers who attended the session stated that they would welcome more networking opportunities with other secondary school headteachers. An officer would look into this.
- One member who had attended part of the discussion panel stated that a headteacher had raised concern about the impact of lockdown on the learning and mental health of children in Early Years and Key Stage 1.
- In response to a question from a member of the public about whether the Islington Education Awards would take place, an officer advised that the committee organising the awards were meeting and there were proposals to hold a virtual ceremony, possibly in April. COVID-19 heroes would be recognised.
- In response to a question from a member of the public about whether schools were providing spaces for exercise as some young people did not feel safe in certain areas and were confined to an estate or certain postcodes, an officer stated that this varied by school. Outside adventure playgrounds had just been reopened under COVID-secure conditions. A member stated that she was aware of a school that did not hold virtual classes on a Friday afternoon to allow time out. The council had an officer who promoted time away from the screen and exercise. The Health and Wellbeing sports team had provided resources for Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2.
- In response to a question as to whether a forum could be created to enable schools to share ideas, an officer stated that, at the Headteachers Briefings, the use of the chat function was encouraged. Schools collaborated well and supported each other and this would be encouraged going forward.
- In response to a question from a member of the public about promoting the use of parks, especially for those with children living on estates, the officer stated that in summer 2020 there had been six weeks of outdoor learning which involved parks. More outdoor learning work could be

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written for the Easter holidays but this depended upon the public health messages at the time.

- A couple of members were still working on obtaining and collating evidence and would present this to the next meeting.
- The Chair explained that all the evidence collected would be used to formulate recommendations and members would be asked to participate in the process.

Anthony Doudle, Head of School Improvement – Primary, gave a presentation on the Richard Reeve's Year 6 Project.

In the presentation and discussion the following main points were made:

- The data in the presentation was derived from a baseline assessment of pupils results on sitting a previous SATs paper. Schools were asked to choose an unfamiliar SATs paper from 2017, 2018 or 2019.
- In 2020, the Year 5 group was not a target group for returning to school and therefore they had not been in school consistently between March and September 2020. Most of them resumed full time education when they entered Year 6 in September 2020.
- Between 19 October and 23 October 2020 the overall attendance in Islington primary schools was 95%. For White British Free School Meals (FSM) children the figure was 89.2% and for Black Caribbean FSM children it was 93.5%. This could have been due to anxiety about their safety.
- Between 9 November and 13 November 2020 the figure for White British FSM children was 93.3% and 94.7% for Black Caribbean FSM children it was 94.7%. This may have been due to parents feeling more secure about sending their children to school.
- Since 4 January 2020, the government expectation had been that remote learning mirrored the learning taking place in schools.
- 689 Chrome books had been given out to Year 6 White British or Black Caribbean FSM pupils and all Year 6 teachers had received training and had taken part in regular networking meetings.
- Home learning resources had been posted online.
- Every family had received an overview of the 10 weeks of learning and a letter from the officer outlining expectations of parents and children. Teachers also sent home exercise books.
- In addition to the 10 weeks of learning, three hours of additional learning was published which included maths, reading, spelling and writing.
- In Reading, Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling (GPS) and Maths, there were three grades – 1) working towards (WT), 2) working at (WA) and 3) greater depth (GD). In primary school, the aim was for most children to be working at. Greater depth was for those demonstrating skills beyond those expected. Islington did well at greater depth and was significantly above the national average and in line with the Inner London average.
- Each grade was based on a raw score converted into a scaled score e.g. GD was 110 and WT was 100. These grades did not change. However,

the raw score did change e.g. in 2017 the word count in reading was 1935 words, in 2018 it was 1717 words and in 2019 it was 2310 words.

- At the time the baseline assessments were undertaken, the transmission rate of COVID increased and many children were self-isolating for 14 days. Since the dataset was produced, ten more schools had undertaken the assessments.
- A high number of children were working towards but this was not uncommon in the autumn term. The children were likely to have forgotten some knowledge and might not yet have covered some areas of the national curriculum.
- There was capacity to move many pupils who were WT to WA and many who were WA to GD by May. This had been demonstrated in the last three years. Writing would be assessed by teachers in June.
- An Attitude to Learning Survey was undertaken which asked Year 6 pupils how often they read, whether they read for pleasure, were confident with spelling Year 5 and 6 words, their times tables, answering maths questions, enjoyed home learning, were confident to complete home learning independently, could manage their time, knew their strengths and challenges, learnt from mistakes and discussed difficulties with the teacher and/or parent/carer.
- All Key Stage 2 assessments had now been cancelled. Work was taking place to get schools to use 2017, 2018 or 2019 papers to assess children.
- The Chair commented that the White British and Black Caribbean FSM children appeared to be behind again and would continue to need additional support.
- In response to a question from a member of the public about whether SATS being cancelled could be an opportunity to look at alternative assessments, the officer advised that he had to be guided by the Standards and Testing Agency.
- A member asked whether schools could get information from Google Classroom on the amount of online learning children, types of connection, device and when logging on. The officer advised that a range of platforms were used by schools. He would speak to the Digital lead to ascertain what data could be collected digitally.

RESOLVED:

That the presentations be noted.

MEETING CLOSED AT 8.50 pm

Chair

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