

Strategy underpinning the transition from COVID-19 Chair's Foreword and Draft Recommendations

Foreword:

What had looked in the summer of 2020 to be an ambitious but relatively straightforward aim for this year's review - to interrogate a wide range of witnesses about the impact of COVID-19, make recommendations to reverse the effects 'on attainment, safeguarding, equalities, youth safety and justice' and prepare for future outbreaks – became ever more constrained by periods of lockdown, illness and self-isolation.

Nonetheless, members of the Committee were each able to attend at least one Zoom interview session with groups of secondary and post-16 students; members of the BAME Community Group (comprising community organisation and supplementary school leaders and some parents); parents of children attending an early years children's centre; a member of the Children's Active Involvement Service (a group for care experienced and looked after young people) and a group of head teachers from all phases.

A number of common threads in the evidence started to emerge and were echoed in officer reports and in research by academics and Ofsted. Over the three months of interviewing witnesses, two elements came to the fore - the corrosive impact of the virus on the disadvantaged and the near-universal experience of anxiety.

The legacy of austerity and the failure of this Government to predict the extent of the pandemic or to adequately fund councils and schools for the additional expenditure generated by it are a savage indictment of its so-called levelling up policies.

Our recommendations cover five aspects of work for the council and its schools. These comprise mental health and well-being; learning and pedagogy; funding; communications and developments post-COVID. They are grounded in Islington Council's commitment to challenge inequality and to make the borough a fairer place for all.

This review has been conducted under unique conditions and the Committee would like to convey its sincere thanks to the institutions, officers and witnesses that have helped to make it possible.

CLlr Vivien Cutler
Chair of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Recommendations

Mental Health and Well-being

1. For children, young people and young adults for whom it continues to have responsibility, Islington Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) service, building on existing good practice, should audit and extend provision where possible or use existing provision creatively to meet burgeoning need as identified both during and after the pandemic.
2. Schools and early years providers should use council information and other resources to ensure that parents/carers with mental health or well-being issues are signposted to appropriate help from adult and community services.
3. Islington Council should develop the Young Islington proposals, in partnership with the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), Public Health and appropriate providers, to offer a counselling service for children and young people during all holiday periods for the foreseeable future.
4. The council should also enhance its specialist youth, youth employment, careers and progression services to support those who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) or starting employment in such uncertain times. In addition to the current developments, including the partnership working with local employers, further education colleges and universities, it should continue to engage with partners such as London Councils and Central London Forward to ensure the local offer can respond to the changing skills needs and employment opportunities generated by growth sectors in the post-Covid economy.

It should further look to helping vulnerable young adults beyond the age of 25 years old through continued close collaboration across youth and adult services and with the borough's Islington Working Employment support partnership.

5. Building on the experience of developing and implementing the Recovery Curriculum, Islington Community of Schools should continue to build and promote a bank of resources to support the mental health and well-being of all children and young people returning to school, whether post-lockdown or following extensive individual absence.
6. The council should highlight its support services through the Employment Assistance Programme for teaching and support staff who may be suffering PTSD because of bereavement for colleagues and/or family.
7. A range of witnesses identified the importance of parks and playgrounds in maintaining well-being during lockdown periods. The council should identify capital funding opportunities to invest in any children's play areas that still need upgrading. The parks team should develop a comprehensive map of all parks and playgrounds, listing their distinctive features and facilities to raise awareness by schools and parents/carers to widen usage.

Learning and pedagogy

8. In tandem with schools and supplementary schools, Islington Council should continue to source additional devices, dongles, SIM cards etc. from a range of donors and charitable organisations to safeguard provision across the board and ensure that every child and young person is prepared for further interruptions to learning. It should develop a culture whereby they recognise learning as easily accessible and not restricted to an educational setting.
9. The council should support schools to gain further understanding of effective learning platforms through undertaking additional research and obtaining best practice models via the Islington Digital Leaders Programme. As best practice and further safeguarding guidance (including GDPR issues) is released, officers should support schools to implement these changes in a timely and effective manner.
10. In order to encourage more primary age children to engage positively with remote learning, Islington Council should continue to provide professional development opportunities for education staff (including supplementary school and non-teaching staff) on how to deliver interactive lessons. This should include clear guidance on the purpose and benefits of live or recorded learning and how it may support learners and their parents/carers.
11. The council should provide support for parents/carers who are finding it difficult to help their children with online learning, especially those who have English as a Second Language or have literacy barriers. This support should cover both IT training and basic English and maths skills.
12. Where there continues to be a lack of devices for each individual pupil, or for vulnerable or SEND children and young people who find remote learning especially challenging, paper packs should continue to be provided by schools. Consideration should also be given to those early years children unable to access provision during lockdown.

Funding

13. The Leader and council should continue to campaign vigorously for significantly more funding from the Government to:
 - Support schools and settings in providing COVID-related safe environments and targeted learning help to narrow the widening attainment gaps.
 - With our partners in North Central London Clinical Commissioning Group, extend council services for mental health and well-being both for parents/carers and children and young people.
 - Underpin sustainability for Early Years and Bright Start services where working from home during lockdown and increased loss of employment threaten the viability of many settings and services.
 - Target financial and in-kind support for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities and families including Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and White British ones.

Communications

14. The number of U-turns by the Government in relation to lockdown, examinations and provision of digital devices has undermined trust. The council, schools and school governors should endeavour to anticipate developments e.g. reduced capacity during holiday periods to support children and young people and their families and communicate these changes to their audiences as early and clearly as is possible in order to reduce anxiety.

Developments post-COVID

15. The experience of life in a pandemic over the past year has highlighted the urgent need for a fundamental re-appraisal of the current education system. Islington Council and its schools should collaborate with academic institutions, local authorities and national organisations such as trades unions to develop alternative models for the future of our communities.