

London Borough of Islington
Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Monday, 20 March 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Monday, 20 March 2023 at 7.00 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Chapman (Chair), Bossman-Quarshie (Vice-Chair), Burgess, Craig, Jegorovas-Armstrong, Ogunro, Ozdemir and Pandor

Also Present: **Councillors**

Co-opted Member Mary Clement, Roman Catholic Diocese
Zaleera Wallace, Parent Governor Representative (Secondary)
Jon Stansfield, Parent Governor Representative (Primary)

Guests

Councillor Sheila Chapman in the Chair

80 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. 1)

Apologies were received for the Executive Member for Children, Young People & Families, Councillor Ngongo

81 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. 2)

There were no substitute members

82 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. 3)

None

83 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (ITEM NO. 4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 28th February 2023 and the Chair be authorised to sign them

84 SCRUTINY COMMITTEE RESPONSE TRACKER (ITEM NO. 5)

The item was noted by the Committee and the Chair thanked officers for providing the additional data requested

85 CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. 6)

The Chair noted that there had been several productive meetings recently, including with care-experienced young people from The House Project and young people known to the Youth Justice Board.

An evidence-gathering session had also taken place with the library service, for which Councillor Jegorovas-Armstrong was thanked for the suggestion for its inclusion.

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Further visits scheduled this week include New River College, Platform, and online calls regarding Detached Youth Work and Disability Action Islington.

86 **ITEMS FOR CALL IN (IF ANY) (ITEM NO. 7)**

None.

87 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. 8)**

None.

88 **EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (ITEM NO. 9)**

89 **QUARTER 3 PERFORMANCE REPORT (ITEM NO. B1)**

The Director of Children's Services, Jon Abbey, presented this item to the Committee, the report for which had already been circulated prior to the meeting. Key points noted during the update included:

- The 6% uptick in take up of free early child education places for eligible two years old, highlighting growth in population
- There have been talks with CMST regarding more work and exploration about take up regarding youth play and adventure playground offer.
- The numbers of looked after children was reducing, Islington had historically high numbers and possibly one of the highest rates in London. 401 was recorded in the summer of 2022-23 but was down to 351 for Q3, and as of Friday (17th March), it was 327.
- Children's contact – there had been a reduction in the numbers recorded.
- Persistent absences for primary and secondary, the provisional data is higher than it would have been in previous reporting periods. There was an action plan being put in place by Pupil Services, targeting those schools marked as red/amber, increasing efforts to bring pupils back into school and make them visible.
- There had been encouraging performance from Young Islington in preventing young people from being victims or perpetrators of crime. For the metric of young people being diverted away from the criminal justice system, there was strong performance with a 96% rate recorded for Quarters 1 to 3 compared to the previous year

In response to questions from the Committee concerning the quality of judgements made by inspectors and whether it should be continued to use as a metric, the Director of Children's Services responded by stating that Ofsted rulings had always been very subjective, but that for any individual or organisation in a position of authority and/or responsibility there should be accountability and that Ofsted was part of that established framework of regulation.

In response to questions from the Committee concerning the Progress 8 score and reducing disparities for the Black Caribbean cohort of children, the Director of Children's Services Jon Abbey noted that Islington's ambition was to be the top quartile of performance and that performance was benchmarked against London data. Many contributing circumstances were cited such as certain subject's weightings, and the means in which schools approach the curriculum for their students. The Director of Learning and Achievement, Sarah Callaghan, also told the Committee that the Key Stage 4 attainment rate had increased by 7%, and that Islington's secondary schools had one of the highest performance rates over the last three years.

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In response to questions from the Committee on repeat looked after children, the Director of Safeguarding and Family Support, Laura Eden, told the Committee that the audit had been completed, and that there were two sets of data on this within the report, the first data set was quarterly, showing that there were three repeat looked-after children in Q3 and the other data set was cumulative, with the figure being less. The themes behind these cases included children becoming re-looked after, having been remanded to local authority care for an offence which was then dropped, only for either a new offence to be committed or a change in family circumstance bringing them back into care via a different path. There was also the first ever instance for Islington of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children becoming re-looked after took place during this year, following interim relief orders from the Court.

In response to questions from the Committee concerning the increase in NEETs (not in employment, education or training), Sarah Callaghan, Director of Learning and Achievement told members that there had been a small reduction in numbers of young getting a September offer for post-16 education, correlating with an increase in of home-educated children. The Progress team were doing a lot of work around this cohort of young people and following up with schools on tracking of student's progress to capture where young people may begin to fall behind. A pilot, preventative model was also in operation in two of the borough's secondary schools.

A member of the Committee cited national news reports of the passing of a headteacher following an Ofsted visit, to which the member expressed that in Islington officers should be stepping in to ensure the wellbeing of the borough's teaching staff, stressing that good school results in tandem with good staff wellbeing should be the ultimate aim. In response, the Head of School Improvement, Anthony Doudle informed members of the Committee that lots of resources were available to support staff with health and wellbeing and that this was provided primarily by the Council's Health and Wellbeing team. There was also a self-sustaining group of local headteachers that provided support to each of its' members. Of the 18 Ofsted inspections this year, a key feature among the reports was around reducing workload and improving mental health and wellbeing

In response to questions from the Committee concerning whether the exam results of home educated children was being recorded, the Head of Pupil Services, Candy Holder, informed the Committee that every family in the relevant is contacted with information on how to register for public examinations at local centres, and for the families that take up the offer at local centres, the Council would know of the results. However, the results do not count towards the borough's statistics. Pupil Services are in regular contact with home educated families, even where they have declined to organise exams through them.

In response to questions from the Committee regarding whether a theme was emerging on persistent absences, the Head of Pupil Services informed members that ill-health (particularly, physical illnesses) was one of the primary causes of persistent absence. Islington was described as an outlier in that regard, and that the problem had increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Collaboration with health colleagues was taking place and a dedicated nurse put in place to visit schools.

In response to questions from the Committee on whether there were different absence codes in effect, and whether that and/or lateness of children travelling across the borough were taken into account, the Head of Pupil Services, Candy Holder, told members that in terms of the absence codes, the same applied to both primary and secondary. They were useful to some degree, but the markers for illness didn't differentiate between colds and COVID for example, and Pupil Services were in the process of asking schools to try and record that separately for analysis. Small

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tolerances of lateness also didn't count as an absence marker unless the instance was extreme, but regular lateness would be followed up with families.

It was noted that there was still disproportionality in the attainment figures for children of Black Caribbean heritage. In response, officers from Children's Services informed the Committee that they were working very closely with Year 6 teachers to think about how to improve progress for this cohort of children, particularly in Maths problem-solving papers which was where most of the issues was found and considering approaches such as adapting the language used.

90 **REPORT BACK ON VULNERABLE ADOLESCENTS 2017/18 SCRUTINY REVIEW (ITEM NO. B2)**

The Committee had been circulated the report on the 2017/18 Vulnerable Adolescents scrutiny review prior to the meeting, providing an update on the current position; the Committee had previously heard an update in 2019.

In response to questions from the Committee about whether there had been closer with housing partners, the Director of Safeguarding and Family Support informed members that the Housing department had been active partners at the table for at least the last few years. Housing officers are present at child protection, call groups and contribute fully to the management safety plan for families. Their input could include, but not limited to, facilitating a move either within and out of borough, securing pre-existing accommodation such as fixing broken gates, windows, or conducting any general alterations to the premises. Staff who had contact with vulnerable adolescents had also been given training

Members were also told that historically when safeguarding vulnerable adolescents, it was sometimes considered in certain instances that relocation out of borough was sufficient enough, but national data has shown this to not be the case. It was important to also consider how to keep families safe if they elect to remain in the borough as well.

In response to concern from the Committee that the eligibility bar for adult social services was so high that there was a risk that these children got lost in the cracks, members were told that when a child has been in care, a legal duty of care was given to them until the age of 25. Members were also told that support continued to be offered to young people transitioning from care that needed it, for a longer time. There was also provision of support from commissioned providers such as WIPERs and St Giles Trust, as well as transitional projects funded through MOPAC however more funding was trying to be secured.

Members were told that it was understood that safer schools were essential, and recently a meeting had taken place to address the safety of children leaving school premises at the end of the day, in light of a recent spate of incidents, and to launch the Safer Schools Protocol. There had some recruitment issues within the borough's command unit, so there were slight gaps in the support they could provide. Additional resource had been put in place through commissioned organisations and non-uniformed police officers also. There are six school safety officers, and each school had a point of contact.

ACTION:

Officers to circulate the Safer Schools Protocol to members of the Committee.

In response to questions from the Committee about training on trauma-informed practice and whether we're all schools across the board were buying into that

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programme and not just local authority-maintained schools, members were told that over 50% of schools were fully trained in iTIPs (Islington Trauma Informed Practices) which required a two-year commitment. A high standard was required to complete that programme and regular supervision meetings with the authority take place. Two academies were potentially joining the programme going forward.

Members cited the use of parent chaperones in the London Borough of Enfield that support children and young people leaving school at the end of the day and questioned whether data was being shared on the effectiveness of the Safer Schools Protocol, members were informed that part of the purpose of the protocol was to share information across partners, and each school had a copy.

91 **SACRE ANNUAL REPORT (ITEM NO. B3)**

The Committee was informed that an agreed syllabus had been implemented in Islington for all schools, faith schools and maintained schools, which would be in place for five years as it was the duty of SACRE to update the syllabus every five years.

New information had been included on data from the recent census, and there were also some new units of work reflecting changes in the approach to how Christianity is taught in the modern world. There were also a good set of lessons on Humanism and what that meant for the community going forward.

All schools are also provided with the accompanying scheme of work on fidelity to faith, to ensure that world faith is being taught accurately, and professional development continues to be provided to the borough's schools.

There was an issue around recruitment and strengthening the SACRE board, to ensure the diversity of faith and non-faith representation remained, and how to improve the numbers of students taking Religious Education at GCSE.

92 **REPORT BACK ON FIXED PERIOD AND PERMANENT EXCLUSION FROM SCHOOL (2018/19) SCRUTINY REVIEW (ITEM NO. B4)**

The Committee were circulated the report prior to the meeting and as part of the update were informed that

- Significant progress had been made against the 14 recommendations, and that the focus has shifted.
- New guidance had been issued in September 2022 around behaviour
- It was felt that a corner had been turned since November 2022.

The Chair of the Committee thanked officers for what was described as tremendous improvement, citing the decrease in exclusions from 111 to 17, and that Islington-maintained schools were doing a tremendous job with inclusive practices.

In response to questions from the Committee about whether New River College were in receipt of extra resources to manage extended support to schools, members were informed that they were funded and particularly for outreach work.

Members were told that unfortunately the same groups were overrepresented in absence and low attainment, particularly Black Caribbean boys, and increasingly Black Somalian cohorts also. The increase in girls being excluded was also highlighted as a concern

Members were told that the Mother Tongue & Supplementary Schools Partnership is one of the routes in which they address the risk of isolation to other cultures to

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students who have been withdrawn from mainstream schools and placed in faith schools

In response to questions from members of the Committee whether there was any follow up on the young people who were permanently excluded, members were informed that there currently small numbers and that alternative arrangements were made individually for their further education. A dedicated officer oversees this and checks in with their future pathways.

In response to questions from the Committee concerning the increase in exclusions among Black Somali children, and what the reasons were, members were told that it was difficult to ascertain, but that generally the reason behind most exclusions was persistent disruption. The London Borough of Camden did some work on the disproportionality of Somali children being excluded. The critical point was noted that parents were caught off guard by how quick the escalation took place, with the action not being communicated with them fairly. This had led to increase guidance and training being put in place to improve communication and involve families at critical junctures where they felt hadn't been before.

In response to questions about whether New River College was conducting outreach at all schools, members were informed that it is working with all schools except one academy. New River College was also recognised nationally as good level of alternate provision.

Members were told that less time was spent talking to Governors about excluding and more time was spent talking about how to include. Nonetheless, guidance stipulated also that zero-exclusion is not a safe route to take either.

In response to questions from members of the Committee about getting more data to tackle the rise in exclusions among the Black Somali cohort and bringing a tangible example of how to work with these groups, it was agreed that a response would be provided on the scrutiny tracker to present to Committee at a future meeting.

The Vice Chair of the Committee expressed gratitude to the Director of Children's Services for his hard work since joining Islington Council.

93 **WORK PROGRAMME AND SCRUTINY INITIATION DOCUMENT (ITEM NO. B5)**

Noted

MEETING CLOSED AT 8.47 pm

Chair