

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

POSSIBLE AREAS OF RECOMMENDATION FOR THE MAKING CHILDREN VISIBLE SCRUTINY REVIEW

This document outlines early conclusions and possible recommendations emerging from this year's review (Making Children Visible). These have been grouped into the three key objectives that were set out at the start of the review.

Evidence was heard from; Arsenal in the Community, Disability Action in Islington, Home Educated families, Islington Foster Carers Association (IFCA), Islington Libraries, Islington Virtual School, Lift, New River College, Platform, Targeted Youth Support, The House Project, Youth Justice Service, and the Head of Voice and Influence at Barnardo's, Josh Harsant.

OBJECTIVE:

TO FURTHER UNDERSTAND AND CONSIDER THE CURRENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO MAY BE AT RISK OF INVISIBILITY TO THE CHILDREN'S SYSTEM AND HOW THE COUNCIL IS RESPONDING TO THESE

1. Finding:

Islington's electively home educating families generally found the information concerning the local authority's offer in terms of the assistance it was able to provide, ambiguous.

Evidence

Testimonials from electively home educating families: a persistent issue raised in each testimony was exclusion from universal services, offers and discounts such as the holiday meals programmes and access to leisure centres. There was also differing levels of awareness among the families regarding the resources open to them as home educating families, such as the home education hub at City & Islington College.

The majority of home educating families met by members, were previously engaged with mainstream education providers, but took up home education because they felt that the support and environment provided did not adequately meet their child's needs. However, there was still a desire expressed among these families for the local authority to be more of a collaborative, proactive partner, stating that the current relationship was purely regulatory. Some parents were open to the possibility of their child returning to mainstream education in the future.

Recommendation:

The Council should consultatively establish an Elective Home Education Charter that clearly sets out the role and responsibilities of the Council in relation to children being educated at home and the support it can provide; the general position concerning benefits, discounts, holiday activities (for example, Lunch Bunch) and public examinations, signposting families to central resource hubs such as City & Islington College. The Charter should make it clear that the local authority will always be ready to explore options should a family wish to return to mainstream education.

2. Finding:

Community awareness of the Council's offer to children and young people across the borough was variable, specifically among the home education community.

Evidence

Testimonials with electively home educating families: Some home educating families that members met, were unaware of various offers open to them as Islington residents such as activities on home cooking and cultural foods.

Disability Action in Islington (DAII): in the session with DAII, it was highlighted that traditional marketing (leaflets, posters) were still quite effective at reaching marginalised or isolated groups (i.e. those for whom English was not their first or spoken language, those with disabilities), and that clients would often bring copies of these printed materials into offices to ask for further explanation of the offer.

Platform Youth Hub and The House Project: Young people expressed that they would be more included to engage with Council services that were visible to them through social media channels.

Recommendation:

The Communications Team at the Council should review marketing practices, means of communication and engagement to ensure that all sectors of the community continue to be made aware of local authority news, promotions and community programmes, specifically working in collaboration with children's services to ensure that home educating families in particular, are receiving updates on the general offer open to them as Islington residents. The Council should also consider, in consultation with young people, exploring and utilising different social media channels that could possibly reach this cohort more effectively.

3. Finding:

Outreach work, particularly that of Islington's detached youth workers, was often constrained by a lack of available or known communal facilities where this outreach could be further developed to draw in vulnerable young people who might otherwise congregate in unsuitable and unsafe locations.

Evidence

Meeting with Targeted Youth Support (TYS): both members of the Committee and TYS workers highlighted that in the north of the borough there were fewer youth spaces from which they could further engage with young people, particularly in the Archway area.

Visit to Lift Youth Hub: During the visit to Lift, the workers and young people expressed their desire to see an equivalent safe space/facility in the north of the borough, to redress what they saw as unequal provision. Young people also reported that when they transitioned from facilities suitable for younger children such as adventure playgrounds, to those for older children, the pathways and spaces open to them specifically catering to their needs, was unclear.

Visit to Platform Youth Hub: During the visit, young people expressed a desire for youth spaces to open on weekends.

Recommendation:

Services across the Council should collaborate internally across directorates and externally with community partners to identify the borough's community assets and spaces that can be opened up to young people and support workers, including on weekends, evenings and in school holidays,.

4. Finding:

Members found that the library service's programme and usage was heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and had not yet been fully restored to its pre-pandemic level.

Evidence

Meeting with Islington Libraries: Library officers noted that young people visit all of the libraries, but the actual number might not be reflected in our library membership as this data is based on active memberships only; visitor counts were not sufficient for this purpose. Library officers had a desire to build on the service's partnerships and restore elements of pre-pandemic programme but are constrained by resources.

Recommendation:

The Council should consider allocating the resources necessary to allow officers to implement measures to transform Islington's libraries into safe havens for children and young people; specifically, to establish the feasibility of:

- Informally commissioning detached youth workers to frequent the library space at peak periods.
- Promoting the borough's libraries as a safe place of refuge for vulnerable young people.
- Strengthening the promotion of mental health support, counselling and health and wellbeing support services during the exam season(s).

- Cross-promoting library services with that of youth services at adventure playgrounds, Platform, Lift and other hubs, as a space for the 13-plus cohort.

The Council should also consider allocating resources to allow officers to evaluate the possibility of introducing measures to bolster the library service's youth offer such as:

- Advertising bookable, group study spaces.
- Restarting homework clubs.
- Collaborating with colleagues from other Council services on delivering a programme of skills sessions on studying, revision, and research.
- Providing library activities, clubs, and events for particular cohorts such as children and young people with special education needs and disabilities, looked after children and/or home educated children and their respective families.

5. Finding:

Corporate data, reporting and key performance indicators – particularly those presented to Committee – are predominantly quantitative and focused on statistical measures, consequently not capturing qualitative, equally-successful, outcomes and progress.

Evidence

Meeting with Targeted Youth Support (TYS): Testimony from staff on the frontline corroborated members' concerns that traditional methods of reporting were not capturing all forms of success – an example given was that sometimes a child remaining in a safe place or simply making efforts to return to school were worthwhile outcomes not currently recordable under existing reporting methods.

IFCA Coffee Morning: Foster carers reported the closing of youth clubs in their neighbourhoods due to those organisations being unable to evidence required outcomes and therefore not being granted funding.

Recommendation:

Officers should consider re-evaluating how reporting of success is measured and recorded across Children's Services to capture hidden outcomes.

OBJECTIVE:

TO EXPLORE HOW SUPPORT TO ATTEND SCHOOL, LEARN AND PREPARE FOR THE WORLD OF WORK CAN BE STRENGTHENED FOR THE FOLLOWING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AT RISK:

- A. CHILDREN WITH A SOCIAL WORKER
- B. CARE-EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE
- C. VULNERABLE ADOLESCENTS

6. Finding:

During the review, young people and those working with vulnerable young people, across Islington, were found to be keen for the local authority to broker more opportunities in terms of employment and business advice. Young people from marginalised groups can find it difficult to access employment and/or training – including the borough's own apprenticeship and learning programmes.

Evidence

Visit to Platform: when asked by members what more the Council could be doing to support young people, the young people at Platform voiced a desire for the Council to provide more employment and training opportunities.

Visit to Lift: when asked the same question by members, the young people at Lift voiced a desire for more support to young people who were entrepreneurial and wanted to start their own business.

Meeting with Targeted Youth Support (TYS): TYS workers highlighted the difficulty in accessing employment and training for young people who had not followed traditional pathways. Lack of grades or lack of completion of the school-brokered work experience programme (which was disrupted during COVID-19 lockdowns) were cited as barriers. An example was given of a student supported by TYS who committed to their course on the basis of a flexible work placement being facilitated at a local garage, to which members noted the Council's facility in Cottage Road could fulfil that purpose. TYS workers also highlighted difficulty in securing mentoring for their young people.

Recommendation:

- (a) The Council should build on the 100 Hours World of Work programme by reviewing and adapting it so that it is more flexible and accessible to marginalised groups such as those not in mainstream education. In doing so, the Council should also consider whether that expanded offer could include opportunities to allow young people to build skills in entrepreneurship, learn how to set up a business, build a website and provide mentoring/coaching for young people through established partners/providers in the Islington area.
- (b) The Council's Inclusive Economy & Jobs service should improve the visibility of clear pathways for marginalised young people to access career pathways and employment support, including the Council's own in-house apprenticeship programmes. In addition, the Council should seek through its procurement processes to secure maximum youth-focused social value, e.g. World of Work opportunities, to enable local businesses to support the borough's marginalised children and young people.

7. Finding

Certain cohorts of children and young people experience higher levels of school absence and lower academic attainment compared to their peers.

Evidence

Reports for scrutiny committee meetings: The Committee heard about the impact absence can have on a young person's education and the need for targeted intervention.

Recommendation:

The Education Board should conduct granular analysis of absence data so that schools can work with their local communities to devise bespoke interventions for specific cohorts of children.

OBJECTIVE:

TO ASSESS HOW THE VOICE OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE CAN BE STRENGTHENED ACROSS THE CHILDREN'S SYSTEM TO FURTHER INFLUENCE THE PLANNING AND DELIVERY OF SUPPORT AND SERVICES, IN EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE WAYS

8. Finding:

While many of Islington's youth services were generally reflective of the community they served, some areas still appeared at surface to be unequal or underrepresented in this regard.

Evidence

Youth Justice Service: first-hand observation from members of the Committee of the staff in Islington's Youth Justice Service, for which it was noted that case managers were predominantly female. This contrasted with the client group which was male dominated. Staff confirmed that this was typically the case.

Targeted Youth Support: first-hand observation from members on how reflective the TYS workforce was of the community served.

Recommendation:

In order to provide a service that is representative of the community it serves, the Council should increase efforts to recruit and retain social workers, youth workers and other positions that work extensively with vulnerable young people, from global majority backgrounds

9. Finding:

There is a profound impact on the mental health and wellbeing of looked after children and children with a social worker from staff turnover within social services. Targeted interventions may be highly effective but when they end, children and young people can face a "cliff edge" where support falls away.

Evidence

The House Project: Young people currently and/or previously supported by the House Project gave testimonies on the effect on their mental health and wellbeing from turnover of social workers, and that it greatly affected their participation and engagement levels.

Youth Justice Service: Young people outlined the effect on their mental health from a turnover of social workers and case managers on their mental health and wellbeing, and engagement with the programme. Young people reported that transition from the youth justice service to the probation service was difficult and left the feeling unsupported.

Recommendations:

- (a) Explore alternative and innovative strategies should be concentrated on further strengthening Islington's high rate of retention of social workers to ensure stability is provided for the borough's looked after children and children with a social worker.
- (b) The Council should ensure that programmes that it runs or commissions to support vulnerable young people (such as The House Project), have some provision for ongoing support.
- (c) The Council should fully realise its aspiration of "Corporate Parenting for Life" so that the most vulnerable young people are supported into adulthood and become part of a mutually supportive life-long community.

10. Finding:

There was more that Islington Council could be doing internally to boost the influence young people have within the local authority, specifically in the decision-making process.

Evidence

Meeting with Targeted Youth Support: TYS workers noted that young people had been invited to participate in decision making before, but that expectations weren't managed about the impact their contribution(s) would have.

Scrutiny meeting of 28th February 2023: During the presentation to the Committee by Josh Harsant of Barnardo's, examples were presented to members of areas in which children and young people's voice could be amplified, citing examples such as (i) the London Borough of Redbridge which was actively involving its young people on planning matters; and (ii) other boroughs that include a section in corporate reports on the impact of a decision on young people.

Recommendations:

- (a) Islington councillors should consider adapting their approach to community engagement to incorporate the voice of children, young people, and families, such as bringing key discussions and meetings into young people's hubs and spaces, inviting and encouraging young people to ward partnerships and inviting school children on environmental visual audits.

- (b) In order to better project the voice and influence of children and young people across the borough, the Council should consider incorporating Child Rights' Impact assessments (a section akin to finance and legal implications, but outlining the impact to children, young people and their rights/lives) into all formal reporting that is presented to its committees.