

London Borough of Islington
Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Monday, 12 June 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Monday, 12 June 2023 at 7.00 pm.

Present:	Councillors:	Chapman (Chair), Craig, Jegorovas-Armstrong, North, Ogunro, Pandor and Zammit
Also Present:	Councillors	Ngongo
	Co-opted Member	Mary Clement, Roman Catholic Diocese Jon Stansfield, Parent Governor Representative (Primary)

Councillor Sheila Chapman in the Chair

105 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Bossman-Quarshie.

106 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. 2)

Councillor Poyser substituted for Councillor Bossman-Quarshie.

107 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

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

It was noted that the minutes of the previous meeting would be put to the next meeting of 4th July 2023.

109 CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. 5)

The Chair gave a warm welcome to two new members of the Committee, Councillor North, and Councillor Zammit.

The Chair noted that there had been welcome news around changes to Ofsted inspections, in which it had been announced that the regulator would avoid naming individual staff and provide more information on the timing of inspections; that inadequate schools are going to be revisited within three months and that schools are going to be given more detail around safeguarding.

The Chair also noted that the Department for Education has published the results of a workforce survey, which showed that 9% of teachers had resigned from state schools. This was in addition to high levels of absence and sickness, and a high record of usage of supply teachers.

110 EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (ITEM NO. 6)

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

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

113 **MEMBERSHIP, TERMS OF REFERENCE AND DATES OF MEETINGS (ITEM NO. B1)**

The Chair asked the Committee to note the report but highlighted the absence of representatives from other faiths on the Committee's membership. The Chair will work with members and officers to fill those vacancies and implored those present to bring forward details of any potential candidates that would be interested.

114 **SCRUTINY RESPONSE TRACKER (ITEM NO. B2)**

The Committee noted the responses within the Scrutiny Response Tracker, and thanked officers for providing them.

The Chair invited officers and the Executive Member for Children, Young People & Families to discuss the Safer Schools Protocol and whether it was working as intended. Key points raised in the discussion included:

- Both the Executive Member for Children, Young People & Families and the Director for Learning & Achievement had visited St Mary Magdalene Academy recently.
- The Police were finding it very difficult to recruit Safer Schools Officers, which was compounded by an overall staff shortage.
- St Mary Magdalene Academy had not had the weekly presence of a Safer Schools Officer for a while.
- Schools are perceiving the Safer Schools Officers as a deterrent, but the protocol itself was to help schools prevent escalations by signposting to diversionary activities and other resources in the Council that can be utilised to help.
- There is a development plan within the protocol to help establish relationships between the schools and Safer School Officers.
- In the absence of a Safer Schools Officer from a site, resources can be moved around to respond to incidents as and when required, but this represents a reactive approach rather than proactive
- The Borough Commander has expressed a desire to fill the Safer Schools Officer vacancies with those that have an interest in the work required.
- Positive feedback had been received from parents about the commissioned work from Jigsaw, tackling anti-social behaviour in and around Highbury Fields. This was an interim measure until Prospects deliver a commissioned programme of detached youth work in conjunction with Targeted Youth Support to ensure coverage of detached youth work across the borough.
- Officers were looking at developing training with the Safer Schools Officers about trauma-informed practice.
- There is a Youth Engagement Team in the Metropolitan Police which deliver a number of programmes in the borough, including bike building and boxing.

The Chair will take the matter of the lack of Safer Schools Officers to the Policy & Performance & Scrutiny Committee and writing to the Borough Commander.

115 **SCRUTINY TOPIC AND DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME (ITEM NO. B3)**

The Chair invited members to note the work programme and discuss potential deep dive topics for the 2023-24 municipal year's scrutiny review. In the discussion, the following was raised:

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- Councillor North put forward a suggestion concerning children's social care placements, and how decisions were made in Islington. It was stressed that getting the right placement first time was important in putting the borough's young people on a pathway for success. It was acknowledged that this was compounded by budgetary issues and numerous policies showing that the market system is undermining placements for our young people on a national level. While Islington compared favourably to statistical neighbours on out-of-borough placement indicators, it was still an issue.
- Councillor Jegorovas-Armstrong agreed with Councillor North and suggested looking at the intervention and prevention in early years. The most vulnerable young people were often those in early years whose voice may not be heard and engaging at that level would have the greatest impact and feed into Islington Together 2030.
- Councillor Zammit put forward another suggestion for a deep-dive topic on Children with SEND needs, the impact on resources in dealing with SEND issues, as well as futureproofing the offer.
- There was a SEND strategy, published in October, that is being refreshed continually.
- The implementation of the SEND Green paper and work to progress that will be something undertaken as part of the usual course of business. The SEND Improvement Plan is about prevention and ensuring young people stay in school.
- There was a national placement sufficiency crisis, in addition to a regional London crisis. There were 50% less homes than are needed for London children, and care homes were closing daily due to a multitude of reasons. There was also the issue of an ageing foster care population, with each local authority needing to approve at least five carers yearly just to maintain the status quo. The Committee were cautioned that as this was a far-reaching crisis, with both national and regional leaders and partners coming together to tackle the issue, that any deep dive on this topic should focus on what can be realistically achieved locally.
- Officers told the Committee that the national housing crisis was not just affecting Islington families but was also having an impact on the Children's Services directorate's client group, with issues including a lack of suitable temporary accommodation, cost-of-living-induced rent arrears, care leavers stuck in supported accommodation, foster carers who can't take on more placements due to not having bigger housing. It was suggested that a one-off report on this could be added to the work programme.
- Officers picked up on the issue highlighted in the Chair's report concerning workforce sufficiency in the education sector, stating that in Islington there was similar issues with early years practitioners, family support workers, and that there had never been so many social workers leaving the profession and the children's workforce overall. The Chair raised a concern about the Committee's ability to make meaningful recommendations on this topic as some of the contributing factors were beyond the Committee's remit.
- There was a North Central London Consortium of six London boroughs, in which Islington was a member and able to share foster carers and supported accommodation and children's homes bed with other participating members. Islington was also in a collaborative with Haringey on a children's home in that borough where one bed was currently block booked. Islington was also involved in another six-borough collaborative based in Barnet, around particular provision. Islington was also discussing with the Department for Education about negotiating with another borough about combining their

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supply of bigger housing with Islington's higher levels of training, support, and practice models.

- There was an expression of interest for a regional co-operative that had to be submitted to the DfE by the end of June 2023. There was to be an assumed London-wide bid, but this did not come to fruition and a North Central London bid is being tabled.
- Islington was looking at working with its corporate landlords and talks with a well-known provider of a children's home to assess whether some buildings could be put in use as a children's home.
- Officers suggested having a one-off report on the work programme for October on children's placement, given the high levels of interest expressed in the meeting.
- The Chair felt there was scope for the Committee to make recommendations that the Housing Allocation policy should give higher priority to foster carers willing to take on more children and will consider taking the matter to the Policy & Performance Scrutiny Committee.
- Members suggested a Council-wide approach to the sufficiency crisis to bolster the work already being undertaken in Children's Services.
- In response to members questions about whether there was anything that could be done about dwindling numbers of children's workers, officers suggested communications could pitched at much higher level. Islington wasn't struggling as much as other boroughs in terms of social services and social workers, so wasn't putting as much into its communications as the other boroughs who were and mounting a stronger recruitment drive. Officers also suggested a smoother onboarding process in recruitment.
- Islington joined a London pledge to not take workers who permanently leave other boroughs for agency work, for a minimum of six months afterwards. In terms of early years and education, work was being undertaken to rebrand education and making Islington unique in its cultural offer and a first choice to teachers.
- It was noted that much of the issues raised by teachers concerned pay and workload, which the local authority has little control to influence.
- Members noted that there could be added value on the workforce issue on terms and conditions.
- Members also suggested tying up with the new cultural strategy on public realm.
- There was a suggestion from members about enriching children from a young age and providing opportunities for them to stay and work in the borough.
- Members highlighted the importance of health and wellbeing in the workforce.
- Officers advised that on the subject of Children's Workforce, the topic could include key workers in supported accommodation, foster carers and residential workers if members wanted to lean more into placement sufficiency element.
- The Chair noted that members were leaning towards Children's Workforce, highlighting that there was a lot of scope, such as looking at residential workers, foster carers and talking to middle aged workers leaving the profession, and that it would be a good body of work.
- The Chair noted the one-off topics suggested by members. Teacher wellbeing and workload will be subsumed into the deep dive. A one-off report on attendance – not just at schools, but at after-school and enrichment clubs – to analyse usage and whether there were any barriers preventing children from accessing them.
- Officers advised that there were some new expectations in terms of the childcare offer for Children at 9 months introduced in September, which new

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funding is supporting. There were several changes coming in, such as the reduction in staff ratios for two-year-olds, which was raising concerns. An overview could be provided on what challenges these changes bring in.

- SEND updates are to be provided with the SEND Transitions Report update towards the end of the municipal year.

ACTION:

Candy Holder to update the Committee towards the end of the 2023-24 municipal year on the SEND Strategy and how it is bedding in.

ACTION:

Theo McLean to work with officers in Children's Services to find space on the work programme for the one-off topics.

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SCRUTINY REPORT (ITEM NO. B4)

The Chair noted her thanks to officers for the drafting of the scrutiny report into Making Children Visible and invited members to approve it, subject to any minor typos.

The Chair also expressed thanks to members and supporting officers across the Council for their hard work on the scrutiny review, and that the evidence gathering sessions was very moving.

RESOLVED:

That the scrutiny report be approved.

MEETING CLOSED AT 8.14 pm

Chair