

London Borough of Islington
Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Wednesday, 19 July 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Wednesday, 19 July 2023 at 7.00 pm.

Present:	Councillors:	Chapman (Chair), Bossman-Quarshie (Vice-Chair), Craig, Jegorovas-Armstrong, North, Ogunro, Pandor and Zammit
Also Present:	Councillors	Ngongo
	Co-opted Member	Mary Clement, Roman Catholic Diocese Zaleera Wallace, Parent Governor Representative (Secondary)

Councillor Sheila Chapman in the Chair

117 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. 1)

Apologies were received from Jon Stansfield

118 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. 2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

119 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

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

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 25th April 2023, and the minutes of the meeting held on 12th June 2023, both be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

121 CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. 5)

The Chair had attended sessions set up for all of the Council's scrutiny chairs to attend. In those sessions, one of the key points raised was that Committee meetings should have regular attendance from relevant senior officers, should be held in such a manner that all are assured that they will be treated respectfully and that where possible, questions should be directed to the Executive Member. Additionally, there should be feedback after each meeting where required.

Another item raised out of these sessions was publicity on the work of the scrutiny committee, particularly regarding the outcome of scrutiny reviews. Positive feedback was received for the Committee's 2022-23 report into Making Children Visible, and the Chair would be writing to all the parties that had given evidence / participated.

The Executive Member for Children, Young People & Families thanked the Committee for their hard work on the 2022-23 scrutiny review.

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The point was also made that scrutiny meetings should be democratic, and that Committee members should consider inviting delegations to attend.

The Chair referenced a story circulating in the news highlighting that families were projected to pay on average, £943 per child for childcare this summer, as well as highlighting the lack of childcare for families of SEND children. The Chair noted that in the context of this, it was good to see the work that was taking place locally in Islington to address the provision of affordable childcare.

122 **EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (ITEM NO. 6)**

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

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

125 **SCRUTINY INITIATION DOCUMENT (SID) & INTRODUCTORY PRESENTATION (ITEM NO. B1)**

Further to the production and circulation of the Scrutiny Initiation Document (SID) for this year's (2023-24) scrutiny review into The Children's Workforce, Recruiting, Retaining and Growing Talent in Islington, a presentation was delivered to the Committee. In the following discussion, the following points were raised:

- The SID focussed on recruitment and retention of the children's workforce in its various forms, and how the Council grows its talent.
- Nationally, the Children's Workforce was really varied, comprising multiple professions and services. Most of these services come into contact with young people at different stages.
- The core children's workforce consisted of those working directly with children and young people, such as social workers, teachers and CAMHS workers, often with statutory responsibilities. There were limited budgets and capacity in these services, leading to complications and pressures in service delivery. It was essential that these services were adequately equipped to provide the preventative service they were designed for. Social workers and teachers played an essential role in the development of children and young people but were not the only aspect.
- The wider children's workforce complemented the core children's workforce, in a more universal capacity and also had a focus on early intervention. This included support staff, developing connections with families, children, and other outreach beyond statutory interventions.
- Pastoral support staff, nurses, and employment coaches were examples of staff that helped young people with transition into adulthood.
- Children and young people should receive the necessary support to access all the opportunities in life. Nationally there had been an erosion of services that meet these needs such as early help and youth work. Early years support was crucial in the development of a child, so that they could reach attainment later on school ready, but this sector needed long-term sustainable funding to realise the benefits. Nationally it was vital this section workforce was addressed to address capacity issues.
- The government continued to invest in new routes into social work. However, despite the investment, significant challenges remain in retention. Social work occurs in challenging environments with lack of resources and increasing demand leading to high levels of stress and departures.
- The role of the family social worker has changed considerably, with challenges that could not be met by social workers alone.

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- Real-term cuts to local authority budgets and funding gaps were impacting the support that could be provided to families. Most local authorities were already overspending on Children's Services.
- Teacher sufficiency remained a problem nationally.
- There needed to be a national drive to recruit occupational, speech and language therapists.
- The National Youth Agency had estimated that there were 3000 youth practitioners working without qualification.
- Youth Offending Services teams have had a demonstrable, positive impact on and were part of a targeted approach to helping families.
- Progression was cited as a key point to consider – locally, that meant looking at workers in the sector progressing into senior leadership roles. Traditionally, said senior leadership roles skewed against particular ethnic groups whereas communities were becoming more diverse.
- It was suggested that Committee members could speak to Human Resources about the current approach to recruitment and retention. There could potentially be a lot of older workers that were suitable fits for these careers but didn't think that they were eligible. The job advertisements were said to sometimes be disillusioning, and the suggestion was made to the Committee that having current staff talking about their roles at job fairs, might help.
- There were also workers/mentor from the voluntary sector, which were generally, demographically diverse, that would be enthusiastic for the opportunity to work for Islington, but may not have the required qualifications, and thus needed additional support to do so. The suggestion was made to reach out to these voluntary organisations as part of the review.
- It was suggested that Committee members also looked at the voluntary youth workforce such as sport coaches, mentors, and the barriers to these voluntary positions in Islington.
- It was suggested that Committee members also consider talking to parent/guardians/ parent carer champions to see how they were coping, and the paths into recruitment for those whose children might have left home or progressed into higher forms of education.
- It was suggested that a workforce media campaign to attract the talent that Islington needed to be comprehensive.
- It was suggested that the Committee should have overall statistics of what the local workforce looked like currently, including the local challenges.
- It was also suggested that the Committee spoke to some frontline staff about what made them start working for Islington and what would make them stay.
- It was also suggested that the Committee speak to MOPAC on issues concerning police liaison.

ACTION:

Officers to co-ordinate the collation and circulation of local workforce statistics, covering early years, education, and youth services, to help inform the Committee's review.

RESOLVED:

That the Scrutiny Initiation Document be agreed.

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SCHOOL REORGANISATION (ITEM NO. B2)

Officers delivered a presentation to the Committee on School Organisation. Key points highlighted in the discussion included:

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- In October 2022, the Executive approved several big plans that drove the borough's educational outcomes.
- Educational excellence would be driven through the education plan.
- It was also an ambition to have inclusive, welcoming schools as set out in SEND strategy.
- There were significant challenges, namely that there were too few children for too many places.
- The school organisation plan was about reconfiguring schools to better reflect school numbers.
- One of the plans going through was the asset management strategy, in which the Council considered the use of the actual buildings that remained, across several departments.
- An increasing number of the borough's schools was struggling financially, but the problem was not unique to Islington. Central Government funded schools on a per child value, and each vacant place represented a loss in income to the school. Other pressures not budgeted for included maintenance and wage cost increases.
- Islington's deficit would be worse were it not for surpluses at some schools.
- There had been a sharp decline in pupil numbers in the past two years particularly, with the context including cost of living, low birth rates, families moving out of London, and housing.
- There were 430 spare places, across reception classes, equating to 14 forms of entry.
- The plan was being implemented in phases. Phase 1 included the amalgamation of two in south of the borough, Copenhagen Primary and Vittoria Primary. The plan also included the removal of six and a half forms of entry borough-wide, but due to the decision made regarding Pooles Park Primary School, this had reduced to 5.5.
- The decline in pupil numbers were projected to become more acute. The Council planned for primary school places by dividing borough into six planning areas, in line with Department for Education (DfE) policy. The Barnsbury planning area was the most impacted (south).
- Data informing decision making was obtained from a number of sources which included birth data, the Greater London Authority (GLA), the Office for National Statistics (2021 census), and other Council services.
- The guidance says that surplus should be between 5 and 10%.
- DfE guidance, which the Council has to operate within, had a presumption to not close schools, and fully address other options to address surplus capacity before moving to closure. This included looking at reducing admission numbers and merging schools through federation, and only when all have been exhausted can closure be considered.
- The quality of education, parental preference, and financial viability; whether the school was a faith school or the only school in the community, were all taken into consideration. In the case of faith schools, the diocese can also propose closure, in addition to the local authority.
- Academies and free schools are their own admission authorities. Their expansion plans can affect local authority planning.
- In the amalgamation of Vittoria and Copenhagen Primary Schools, the service first had to conduct an informal consultation for four weeks, which was extended to ensure community had enough time to consider the proposals. The proposals then went to the Executive for the representation period, for four weeks, then another paper had to go back to the Executive for a formal

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decision. The Copenhagen Primary School site was identified as larger with greater flexibility and thus chosen to account for potential, unforeseen upticks in the school population.

- Islington was sharing best practice with colleagues, including its approach and methodology, which had also garnered interest from London Councils.
- There was a big drift of 20% between primary and secondary school pupil numbers. Officers said they were fortunate to have additional resource currently conducting a media campaign on why Islington was the best choice for education, and engaging with families, to encourage them to stay with us. In terms of families choosing private, secondary education, it was around 6%, in line with national data.
- Camden had a larger independent sector, leading to a larger drift between primary and secondary school.
- It was noted that much of the drift in Islington came from parental choice and perception. It was said that each secondary school had a unique selling point that could attract or repel families. Officers were surveying schools about what it was that was driving parental choice. All Islington schools were rated good or outstanding except one. However, perception was a strong factor, and the ability for a school to offer the diverse curriculum that can attract students could be compromised by low interest / student numbers, because of the value attached to each student.
- The objective of the media campaign was getting schools to talk about the offer they provided and reinforcing positive messages that didn't often get highlighted. Examples were cited of other local authorities celebrating school results and achievements at Town Halls. It was also noted that there was sometimes perception among parents and families that schools in the neighbouring boroughs were better.
- There was not a scientific tool in weighing deficit versus quality outcomes, it was nuanced, and some schools were managing the deficit whereas others were not.
- Officers were having conversations with several Council departments such as Housing, so that issues were not being addressed in isolation.
- All types of schools were included in calculations.
- The Council had recruited to a specialist Elective Home Education (EHE) post. Students lost to EHE did have a financial impact.
- In Islington, SEND educational outcomes were better than national averages, year on year. Islington was three times better in term of its children going on to employment, education and/or training.
- Islington was adopting a status-neutral approach, centred on outcomes for children rather than the type of school. However, there was agreement among the borough's academies to reduce their PAN, but that still needed to go through the due process.
- Long-term, the situation was worsening, according to the data. The GLA data in particular was up to 2030. Islington had a surplus of capacity that needed to be reduced in that time, but there were a number of variables that could disrupt that.
- Officers were looking at the communities that were not accessing the Council's childcare offer. Particular focus was centred on the Turkish, Cypriot and Black Caribbean communities. It was noted that the sooner the families were able to access childcare, the more positively the child would be able to progress through their education.

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QUARTER 4 PERFORMANCE REPORT (ITEM NO. B3)

In the discussion of the report, the following points were raised:

- Attendance remained a key priority for the council, but the data demonstrated it was still quite an acute problem. Factors could include issues at home, and holidays during term time, among others, and work was needed to understand the issues driving the situation.
- There was a lag in the reporting of suspensions in the report against the live data, which had showed improvement in the attendance figures.
- Every single school in Islington was RAG rated (risk assessed).
- The approach officers were taking was on how to support individuals from a multi-agency perspective. The Department for Education (DfE) had a positive response to Islington's approach and adopted a mostly hands-off approach with Islington, due to the robust procedures already in-place.
- All schools were rated good or outstanding, except one which required improvement.
- The Council was not encouraged to make direct comparisons because the assessment framework had changed.
- Take up of the two-year old offer had improved, but because the report data was for Quarter Four, there was not comparative data for the current, improved position.

ACTION:

Officers to provide the Committee with further analysis to give reassurance on how and when attendance penalties are being used, and who they are being used against.

ACTION:

Officers to provide the Committee with provisional, live data on suspensions.

ACTION:

Officers to provide the Committee with information on which secondary school Ofsted ratings.

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WORK PROGRAMME 2023-24 (ITEM NO. B4)

Members requested a one-off presentation on attendance be added to the 2023-24 work programme.

ACTION:

The Chair to work with officers to find a suitable date on the work programme for the presentation on attendance.

RESOLVED:

That the 2023-24 work programme be noted.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.10 pm

Chair