

London Borough of Islington
Children's Services Scrutiny Committee - Tuesday, 31 October 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on Tuesday, 31 October 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

Councillor Sheila Chapman in the Chair

141 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (ITEM NO. 1)

There were no apologies for absence.

142 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (ITEM NO. 2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

143 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (ITEM NO. 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

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

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 14th September 2023 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

145 CHAIR'S REPORT (ITEM NO. 5)

The Chair informed the Committee that they would be working with officers in the coming weeks to prepare evidence sessions for this year's scrutiny review. This included arranging sessions with Rose Bowl Youth Centre, The Parent House, and the fathers' group in Highbury, and the Chair would inform all members as and when these sessions would be taking place.

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

Three members of the public were in attendance.

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

None.

148 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM NO. 8)

None.

149 **ATTENDANCE (ITEM NO. B1)**

Officers delivered a presentation to the Committee on school attendance in the post-pandemic era. In the discussion, the following points were raised:

- Officers highlighted in their presentation, the national context behind school attendance. The Council had received correspondence from the Chief Executive of the Youth Justice Board, the Children's Commissioner, and the Chief Medical Officer, acknowledging, pledging support for, and urging a focus on improving school attendance.
- The Committee were told that one of the most damaging legacies from the pandemic was that there was now a generation of students out of the habit of attending school regularly, as a result of pandemic-related school closures.
- The Committee were also told that sociologists' initial predictions of attendance levels bouncing back afterwards, had not transpired. Instead, data had shown there had been an almost doubling of school absences overall, since the pandemic. Persistent absences also doubled over the same period.
- A child not attending school above 90% of the time was the equivalent of an entire school year not in education over the course of a student's career.
- Emerging research illustrated particularly troubling trends, such as poor labour outcomes for the COVID generation, and a pattern of emerging workplace inequalities.
- While all children were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, children from the most deprived areas were more profoundly affected than others.
- Officers delivered a demonstration of how they are able to analyse and collect live data.
- In response to concerns from members that performance was decreasing and absences higher and more entrenched in Islington than statistical neighbours over recent years; and questions about how this was considered in the school reorganisation, officers responded that all factors were considered, of which there were many. One was that Islington had one of the highest deprivation rates in the country and there was a very strong link between deprivation and attendance. Another was there was some correlation between schools that had lower-rolls, and that those schools appeared to be struggling more. The issue was complex and spread across schools. During the pandemic, Islington's attendance rate was above regional and national measures, but it had unfortunately reverted since then.
- In response to questions from the Committee, members were told that traditionally, peaks in absence had been concentrated on years ten and eleven, but increases were now being seen across the board, including at primary level. While officers acknowledged members' concerns that encouraging 100% attendance may place pressure on students, officers stated that it would be too much of a risk to encourage anything less. In terms of fines for school absences, the vast majority were for holiday time absences which parents were increasingly factoring into the cost of

their holiday; the Department for Education (DfE) were pushing for parenting orders as an alternative but historically, officers had not found this approach to be particularly effective.

- In response to questions from the Committee, members were told that schools make all reasonable efforts to contact and locate absent children and their families. They would also inform officers that can perform follow up visits should schools be unsuccessful in doing so. Each child's circumstances were individual and considered; and form the basis of targeted support meetings in which the most appropriate means of intervention is decided.

ACTION:

Officers to provide the Islington statistics on emotional-based school avoidance.

150

YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICE / YOUTH JUSTICE PLAN (ITEM NO. B2)

Officers delivered an overview of the plan to the Committee. In the discussion, the following points were raised:

- Officers apologised for typos in the report and acknowledged that the version put before members was in draft form. A final version would be put forward to the Youth Justice Board in November, incorporating feedback from both the Committee and other partners.
- The report was a statutory requirement and the Youth Justice Service itself was a statutory service under the Criminal Justice Act 1988.
- The numbers of young people being supported by the Youth Justice Service had been curtailed over the last five years, which was good. There had been just thirty-seven first time entrants into the service which was an improvement on a peak in 2014.
- Officers were pleased with the performance on custodial sentences and the reduction in the reoffending rate to date.
- There had been an increase in female offenders and officers were investigating the reasons behind this as well as responding to this change.
- There continued to be an overrepresentation of Black Caribbean boys although on average their offences were mostly of a lower gravity.
- The most common types of offences perpetrated by young people in 2022-23, included violence against a person, robbery drug offences and motoring offences. Highbury and Archway generally saw a higher concentration of offences committed.
- A major protective factor to young people was involvement in education, employment and/or training, as well as supportive and nurturing families.
- Officers noted that groups of concern/priority included white working-class boys and looked after children, who were said to be more vulnerable to exploitation.
- Members advised that officers should consider the primary audience of the plan, with specific reference to the length of the document, use of acronyms and what was said to be a retrospective focus; suggesting to

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officers that the density of the text is broken down and the prospective elements given more weight. Officers responded, highlighting that the plan was an annual, statutory document with at least five different audiences, with the Youth Justice Board mandating what needed to be included. Officers told the Committee that the plan intended to highlight achievements as well as ambitions, and agreed with members that the plan could be strengthened by adding case studies.

- Members stressed that where the plan references the vicinity of Highbury Grove School as a hotspot for offences, it should be made clear that it is the area surrounding the school, and not students at the school itself.
- In response to questions from the Committee, officers noted that in terms of the universal offer, there was more work to be done and improvements to be made.
- The Committee were told that the means in which young people were represented at court was important. Officers would often give background to officials on a young person's circumstances, trauma and educational needs and would often advise court officials, including judges, to adapt their language in a way that the young person can understand. Officers based at Highbury Corner assist with this.
- In addition of a report on disproportionality there was an evaluation report funded by MOPAC in the works.
- Officers were making active efforts to hold partners to account. Parent Champions and Youth Justice staff had also participated in training/recruitment of police staff, in teaching them about early age trauma and the experience of a young person who has been stopped and searched. Officers had also delivered training to magistrates, district judges and lay benches about disproportionality.
- Safer Neighbourhood Boards hold the police to account on stop and search, behaviours, and practices, and have representatives of the youth justice service and young people, on the board.
- In response to questions from the Committee, officers highlighted that they do take onboard learning from neighbouring local authorities, such as Haringey, Hackney, and Camden, as well as other authorities further afield.
- Officers acknowledged that not all of the work and achievements undertaken would have been captured in the document, and some had to be edited out to avoid it being excessively long, however if members felt there was something missing that should be added back in, officers would consider it.

ACTION:

The Executive Member for Children, Young People & Families will invite members of the Committee to any sessions that is felt would benefit the work of the Committee / support the Scrutiny Review. This includes visits to Highbury Corner Magistrates Court and a practice fortnight of events promoting Islington's offer to children, young people, and families.

ACTION:

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Officers to invite the Committee to the Practice Fortnight in March 2024 for the Youth Justice Service and arrange for members to also attend a Practice Fortnight for Children's Social Care.

ACTION:

Officers to provide members with further information on what the service is doing to tackle disproportionality.

151

WORK PROGRAMME (ITEM NO. B3)

The Chair informed the Committee that the work programme had been revised to account for scheduling issues. The Metropolitan Police were unavailable to present evidence at this meeting (31st October) and will instead attend the meeting of 28th November 2023. Additionally, the Executive Member for Children, Young People & Families has given apologies for the meeting of 28th November 2023, and will instead present their item, "Executive Members Report" at the meeting of 15th January 2024 instead.

MEETING CLOSED AT 9.05 pm

Chair