

**LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS**

**MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE**

**HELD AT 5.30 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 11 AUGUST 2020**

**ONLINE 'VIRTUAL' MEETING - [HTTPS://TOWERHAMLETS.PUBLIC-I.TV/CORE/PORTAL/HOME](https://towerhamlets.public-i.tv/core/portal/home)**

**Members Present:**

Councillor Gabriela Salva Macallan – In the Chair  
Councillor Mohammed Pappu  
Councillor Helal Uddin  
Councillor Shah Ameen  
Councillor Kyrsten Perry  
Councillor Andrew Wood

**Co-opted Members Present:**

Neil Cunningham	– Parent Governors
Joanna Hannan	– Representative of Diocese of Westminster
Ahmed Hussain	– Parent Governors
Dr Phillip Rice	– Church of England Representative
Khoyrul Shaheed	– Muslim Faith Community

**Others Present:**

Robert Bielby	– (Service Manager Children Looked After & Leaving Care Service, Children's Social Care)
Councillor Danny Hassell	– (Cabinet Member for Children, Schools, and Young People)
Christine McInnes	– (Divisional Director, Education and Partnerships)
Layla Richards	– (Head of Strategy and Policy – Children and Culture)
James Thomas	– Corporate Director, Children and Culture
David Knight	– (Democratic Services Officer, Committees, Governance)

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

No apologies for absence were received at the meeting.

**2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interest were received.

### **3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed and approved as a correct record. Chair authorised to sign.

### **4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION**

#### **4.1 Impact of Covid 19 on Children's Services**

The Sub-Committee received presentations that outlined the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Tower Hamlets so far and attempted to predict the impact going forward with reference to a) the overall context and financial pressures; b) Children's Social Care and Early Help; and c) Education and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The presentation focused on the national impact to date, the local impact (comparing before and after lockdown, including the results of the recent Tower Hamlets resident survey) and any groups particularly impacted. The presentations then went on to predict challenges and opportunities over the next 12 months and beyond. It was noted that overall, the physical, mental, and social repercussions of Covid-19 go far beyond the virus itself. One of the main cross-cutting themes the Sub-Committee noted being that Covid-19 had shone a light on inequalities, although the Sub-Committee was advised that these could be exacerbated further and would lead to poorer outcomes for residents, higher demands for support and increased financial pressures on the Council.

However, the Sub-Committee also noted the areas of positive impact, raising a question on how the Council can best keep hold of these as lockdown restrictions ease. In addition, that there would be other opportunities for the Council to capitalise on to the benefit of residents and the Borough. The main points of the discussion may be summarised as follows:

#### **(a) Overall Context and financial pressures**

The Sub-Committee:

- Noted that the Council faces a whole range of rising demands especially with regards special education needs and social care.
- Was reminded that whilst through the budget process last year LBTH had invested additional funding in these areas. The impact of the pandemic on the first financial quarter of this year had been considerable as the social care demand rises as children go back the school.
- Recognised that the impact of Covid-19 upon local young people and their families has been an experience of isolation; pressure of high anxiety; and for some of an increased safeguarding risk.

- Acknowledged the commitment; resilience and flexibility of LBTH staff in the way they have developed new ways of working at extraordinary speed since March and April.
- Noted that the delay to planned activity to deliver transformation efficiencies and savings in this financial year has had a cumulative impact on Children's Services as it has had across the Council.
- Noted that (i) there has been a significant increase in the Councils expenditure which is primarily related to support for those families with no real access to other funds; (ii) it is forecast that there will be an increase in the level of support to special educational needs and disabilities; (iii) there would be an increase in pressure in relation to contract services which are in relation to overspends in relation to the delivery of cleaning and catering services; and (iv) with regards to the Direct Schools Grant there has been a long standing pressure on the high needs block. Primarily due to government underfunding essentially of services for children with special educational needs and disabilities and whilst there is a recovery plan in place a 4 million pound overspend is forecast in that area. As it is anticipated that there will be a (a) backlog of demand due to the lockdown; and (b) possibility of a significant spike in demand in the autumn.
- Was informed in relation to additional funding from government so far there has been little that is specific to Children Services and Schools. Although there has been funding to meet the mental health and emotional well-being needs.
- Noted that there is an intensive lobbying effort from councils across the country to address the shortfall in the government's level of relief.
- Was informed that in respect of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) whilst the Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) are the primary commissioner the Council does make a substantial contribution to the joint funding of this service. In addition, talking more broadly about children young people's mental health needs these do not only get met through CAMHS. As majority of issues are around depression anxiety; low self-esteem and how they deal with pressures at home or their peers do not require a clinical response.
- Acknowledged that it is the collective capacity within LBTH including mobilising the resources within formal/informal voluntary sector
- Noted that as the High Needs funding block had a cumulative deficit of £12 million and LBTH have submitted a recovery plan to the Department for Education (DfE) and LBTH have been commended by the DfE on the quality of the recovery plan
- Noted that LBTH are currently conducting a consultation regarding the closure of two schools in the Borough and have an agreed position around how to conduct that consultation and it is a methodology that will be used to conduct the consultation over the restructures of the SLS and the SEND team. Accordingly, the Sub-Committee asked to receive a report on the future SEND and Children's Services financial provision.
- Noted that that there has been real progress both in terms of encouraging agency social workers to make a longer-term commitment

to Tower Hamlets. In addition, LBTH are currently reviewing all the agency staff to ensure that that plans are in place to either encourage them to seek a permanent position within LBTH or to be able to recruit permanently to such posts.

**(b) Children's Social Care and Early Help**

- Was advised that the pandemic has had a significant impact on children young people in terms of both their physical and mental well-being.
- Noted the pandemic has really allowed for strong partnership working across different agencies which allows safeguarding partners to identify vulnerable children both in terms of shielding and socially vulnerable. This has allowed LBTH to have a reasonably good oversight, but more work needs to be done regarding listening to the voice of young people. Whilst LBTH has had a strong an emphasis on the voice of children young people through the Corporate Parenting Board this is still something that needs to be considered going forward. LBTH needs to have a lot more focus on how it communicates with young people and how they consume messages.
- Was informed that LBTH intends to maintain direct contact with the most vulnerable families and whilst technology may be excellent in many cases there is a need to increase direct work for those families in need.
- Noted that LBTH has remained in contact with all families who were already known to them using a combination of technology and home visiting has meant that LBTH was able to move to a virtual model with support provided over the phone.
- Noted as pupils return to education, LBTH need to be prepared to make sure schools and teachers, children's social care and other safeguarding partners are ready to support every young person who has suffered during lockdown.
- Noted that regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on child protection practice and children and families, with the aim of improving the capacity of social workers to keep children safe in a period of social distancing and alleviating the social impact of the pandemic.
- Noted that a crucial way child protection work is achieved is by social workers and family support workers by developing close relationships with them that involve immersing themselves in their lives and the routines of the family.
- Noted how children and families are being worked with through in-person and virtual home visits during the pandemic, including the availability and use of Personal protective equipment (PPE). The Sub-Committee also noted the social worker's experiences and maintaining social distancing by working almost exclusively from their own homes.

**(c) Education and SEND**

- Noted that the response of the Boroughs schools in this was a real strength of the partnership response in Tower Hamlets and demonstrated more than ever actually the role and impact that schools have in so many ways for the young people and their families both in terms of safeguarding; parental support; and the educational added value. This is because of the strength and depth of relationships that practitioners in schools and working with schools in Tower Hamlets have with those with those families.
- Noted that in Tower Hamlets the schools work very cooperatively, and this was made particularly clear through the pandemic and highlighted the key role that the Education Partnership has played in disseminating good practice and explains why most of LBTH schools remained open to key worker and vulnerable children.
- Noted that there was only 1 outbreak in a school in the Borough and that was the case that was outside of school and that was dealt with in line with the agreed protocols.
- Noted that regarding the use of technology there is a noticeably digital divide for many of local families and LBTH have started to roll out laptops to several the Boroughs vulnerable young people. However, technology alone is not going to make up the gap with the educational disadvantage as the biggest positive impact is having children in the classroom with a good quality teacher and that is what Tower Hamlets schools do well. This goes back to the importance of face to face interaction as with social workers for many of our children's families.
- Noted that fewer children starting in September 2020 are likely to be 'school ready'. Whilst children leaving education this year and seeking employment are likely to find it harder.
- Noted that the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has indicated that the closure of schools to most pupils 10 weeks ago has potentially reversed all progress made to close the gap in narrowing the educational and inequalities that makes the return to school all the more important.
- Noted that there is a level of real concern in local communities and over the summer there will be much work around communications sharing messages and reassuring parents that it's safe for their children to return as much as LBTH can make it safe but also that LBTH need to ensure children return
- Noted that in LBTH 70 percent of local schools had continued to operate with some of them acting as "hub schools" for other local schools and receiving children in and others just taking their own people sometimes only two or three pupils and during the holidays LBTH had continued with their holiday childcare programme which was very successful. Noted that schools had provided physical packs and had used the opportunity of families coming in to collect those packs as a kind of welfare check with the families. Also, schools set up food banks and provided all kinds of other help to families
- Noted some schools supplemented what was provided by setting up their own food banks and extended the eligibility criteria to all self-identifying as being in need.

- Noted that a comprehensive council offer had been put in place, with several community kitchens operating over the Easter holidays, food distribution to vulnerable families and food banks. The Mayor's free school meal pledge was suspended and only children eligible under the national free school meals criteria had access to free school meals, except those attending school who had a cooked meal.
- Noted that Contract Services had provided the contents for food bags to the agreed value to be packed and distributed by schools; with some schools purchased their own vouchers for families. Food parcels were either delivered to or collected by parents. This provided opportunities to maintain contact with families.
- Noted that from 1st of June primary schools were permitted to open for reception Year 1 and Year 6 and secondary schools were to have some face to face contact for years 10 and 12.
- Noted that apart from the social workers the Behaviour and Attendance Team were contacting families on at least the weekly basis. However, if there was no response that would be then referred to the Children's Services Directorate's Multi- Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). In addition, all the Boroughs schools were asked to confirm that they contacted all families within their school community.
- Was informed that LBTH had undertaken a lot of work in terms of improving the knowledge around the latest research and statistics concerning Covid-19 and have provided a lot of health and safety advice to school.
- Noted that schools have had and two different sets of risk assessments one quite early in the process and an updated version to help them prepare for September. The risk assessments have been shared with the trade union representatives and staff and have had the opportunity to speak with the Headteacher and senior leaders. Noted that there has been some individual flexing of the system to take of school's specific needs. This has gone very well in fact Alex Kenny National Education Union (NEU) national executive member has been impressed in the way that school leaders have engaged with staff.
- Noted that there have been communications campaigns targeted at parents and a lot of work has been undertaken with headteachers and staff.
- Noted that risk management is an important part of a headteacher's job to manage risks to make their schools safe places. Therefore, they have applied that knowledge during the pandemic.
- Noted that Education Health and Care Plans have continued to have been issued throughout the crisis.
- Noted that SEN panels had been meeting remotely at least weekly with attendance from all Members and LBTH have worked closely with the special schools (i) Phoenix has remained open throughout the crisis; and (ii) Bowden House the residential school did close for a number of weeks and then reopened using a rota basis for its pupils.
- Was informed that regarding those socially vulnerable children consideration must be given as to why they are socially vulnerable and how they can be supported e.g. some children became vulnerable

because of the impact on family employment was one of the things that happened quite early and family incomes had plummeted. This emphasised the importance of the more practical aspects of support e.g. The Holiday Hunger Scheme (known in Tower Hamlets as Healthy Holidays) will be running throughout August, with free food available for collection from 6 locations across the Borough; LBTH are also running a holiday childcare scheme with a focus on vulnerable children and those children of key workers and the Tackling Poverty Team to ensure that the with wide provision across the Borough.

- Noted that attendance at school will be mandatory again from the beginning of the autumn term, the Government has indicated that it wants all pupils in all year groups in England to go back to school full-time in September. With class size limits - or "bubbles" - imposed to curb the spread of the virus increased to allow every child to return to school. That is to say that primary schools have been asked to have 'bubbles' which include a whole class, while secondary schools are likely to have 'bubbles' that contain a whole year group – this is to ensure as many subjects as possible can be taught. Schools will also have to stagger break and lunchtimes, as well as start and finish times, to keep groups apart and reduce foot traffic in canteens, corridors, and doorways.
- Was advised that the Tower Hamlets Education Partnership (THEP) is summarising government guidance and curriculum planning.
- Noted that regarding school buses, the "one-metre" plus social distancing rule is not required. Instead, schools have been asked to group students in 'bubbles'.
- Noted that LBTH has (i) established a "Covid 19 Taskforce" which will include school staff, pupils, parents, unions and council staff to consider issues arising from the COVID 19 pandemic which impact on early years and school communities in the Borough; (ii) conducted a qualitative evaluation with school stakeholders, identifying facilitators and barriers to children's' attendance.
- Noted that Tower Hamlets schools are particularly good at working with children with certain disadvantages and getting really good results that that the gap between those pupils eligible for free school meals and other pupils is quite narrow and quite impressive.

Councillor Danny Hassell; James Thomas; Robert Bielby; and Christine McInnes were thanked for their presentations.

## **5. ANY OTHER UNRESTRICTED BUSINESS CONSIDERED TO BE URGENT**

The Chair Moved and it was:

**RESOLVED** that

1. The frequency of the Sub-Committee meetings should be increased to allow for a full and detailed consideration of Children and Educational issues.

2. The Sub-Committee should through the Vice-Chair be able to fully participant in the work of the scrutiny function.
3. They wished to receive a report on the Victoria Park One O'clock Club.
4. The Sub-Committee should receive reports on the future SEND and Children's Services financial provision.
5. They wanted the opportunity to consider Cyberbullying.

The meeting ended at 7.45 p.m.

Vice-Chair in the Chair, Gabriella Salva-Macallan  
Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee