

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

HELD AT 5.30 P.M. ON WEDNESDAY, 14 APRIL 2021

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

Members Present:

Councillor Bex White (Chair)
Dr Phillip Rice (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Gabriela Salva Macallan
Councillor Andrew Wood
Councillor Kyrsten Perry

Co-opted Members Present:

Ahmed Hussain – Parent Governors

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Asma Begum

Apologies:

Councillor Helal Uddin
Neil Cunningham

Others Present:

Sue May – Team Manager at Adopt London East

Officers Present:

Richard Baldwin – (Divisional Director, Children's Social Care)

Deion Grant – Team Manager Family Support and Protection

Mohammed Jolil – (Interim Head of Early Help)

Pauline Maddison – (Interim Director, Education and Partnerships)

Lissa-Marie Minnis – Service Manager Regulated Services & Resources

Nicola Mutale – Early Help Operations Manager

Sam Nair – Principal Social Worker - Children with Disabilities Team

Sara Rahman – Service Manager

Layla Richards – (Head of Strategy and Policy – Children and Culture)

Karen Simpson – Early Help Coordinator

Jonathan Solomons – (Strategy and Policy Manager - Children and Culture)

James Thomas – (Corporate Director, Children and Culture)

Mubarakat Uthman
Farhana Zia

– Senior Practitioner Social Worker
– Democratic Services Officer

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillor Helal Uddin and Mr Neil Cunningham, Parent Governor gave apologies for absence.

Mr Ahmed Hussain, Parent Governor gave apologies for an early departure from the meeting.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interest were made by the members.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes from the previous meeting of 9th February 2021 were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting and were signed off by the Sub-Committee.

Matters arising

Councillor Bex White, informed members she had received an update on the offer made by the Silver Employment group as well as on workplace testing for early years settings.

Councillor White said she had a discussion with Councillor Asma Begum and Councillor Rachel Blake about PPE.

- **ACTION:** Councillor White to share emails exchanged in relation to PPE, with other members of the Sub-Committee.

4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

4.1 Impact of Covid 19 Children's Social Care

The Sub-Committee received a verbal update on the impact Covid-19 is having on social care and the supporting of vulnerable children and families.

The Sub-Committee heard from Mr Richard Baldwin, Divisional Director for Children's social care, who stated that over the past twelve months the social care teams have had to use innovative methods to stay in touch with young people and their families. He said there had been a shift in how families relate to the Council and demand at the front-door had also been affected. He said there was plenty of new ideas as to how the Council can do things differently in the future.

The Sub-Committee heard from Ms Mubarakat Uthman, a senior practitioner on how contact with young people had been maintained throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

The main points made by Ms Uthman were:

- Prior to the pandemic, face to face visits were held with young people, this would involve engaging with them in age appropriate activities such as sharing food or playing games
- During the pandemic many visits have taken place via Teams and Zoom. Creative ways have been used to support young people to open up and talk about their issues and worries. Examples of this included using TikTok dances as an icebreaker to encourage open dialogue; to arranging a pizza delivery to the young person in a placement and sharing dinner and conversation with them.
- With young babies and toddlers, puppets have been used to interact with them, playing peekaboo and storytelling whilst speaking with their carers about the child's health, such as weight and eating habits.
- Virtual meetings can make it harder to hold difficult conversations due to privacy and confidentiality issues.
- Virtual meetings have been a positive addition to the tools a social worker can use to engage with young people, however face to face engagement is also necessary.

The Sub-Committee then heard from Ms Deion Grant, Team Manager in Family Support and Protection on how contact with young people had been maintained throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and how the welfare of staff had been managed.

The main points made by Ms Grant were:

- Despite their own fears about Covid-19, social workers continued to provide an excellent service to protect vulnerable children and families, especially for cases which involved neglect. Ms Grant said it was obvious to the social work team, that such cases could not be fully managed by virtual visits and therefore face to face visits continued throughout the pandemic.
- The pandemic had heightened fears among the looked after children and their families. Social workers had to reassure families that visits could take place safely. There was positive engagement from young people to return to education, with some more eager than previously.
- Social workers expected domestic violence cases to increase during the lockdown and as such discussions took place as to how the team would deal with this.
- Prior to the pandemic and the lockdown, social workers would meet in team meetings, to discuss cases and decompress. However, this moved to the virtual platform. As a team leader it was vital contact was

maintained within the team and reflective practice, such as why are you worried, how are you feeling were encouraged and used.

- Senior management were swift in putting in place policies to support social workers, going out on visits and equipped them with PPE. This helped maintain the caseload and ensure there was not a backlog.
- Staff were encouraged to take annual leave and maintain a healthy balance between work and personal time.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- There had been no disconnect between conducting face to face visits and those held virtually. In respect to concerns about bruises which can be hidden, in an online scenario, Ms Uthman said of the cases managed by her, she had not experienced this, save for two cases that gave reason for concern. In both instances face to face meetings were conducted as they were considered as safeguarding issues and were thoroughly investigated. Mr Baldwin added that where there is a child protection plan or a safeguarding concern, regardless of the pandemic face to face visits had taken place.
- With regards to access to education, young people in a placement had been supported throughout the pandemic; most children were in school especially as they were classed as vulnerable children. However, children did experience stress and anxiety about the pandemic and missed their friends and social network, with a desire for things to return to normality. Children who did not want to return to school, during the height of the pandemic were given laptops to access online learning.
- In response to how mental health and wellbeing was managed during the pandemic, Ms Uthman gave examples of how vulnerable children had been supported, from providing a mobile phone to a teenager so she could stay in touch with her friends, to art therapy in schools for those dealing with bereavement. She recommended art therapy be made available to all children, especially those dealing with trauma and anxiety.
- Members commended the social workers for their efforts and said they appreciated how difficult it could be to engage with young people. Members were appreciative of the balance struck in social workers performing their work and being supported to take annual leave.
- In response to if people in need of support were being missed due to the pandemic, Mr Baldwin said the same relationships and processes were in place as previously. He said they maintained a close link with schools, and other stakeholders such as the police and health visitors ensuring concerns were picked up. He said there was an assumption that there would be additional pressure on social work from an increase in domestic violence cases, but this hasn't filtered through. Nevertheless, the service remained vigilant to this.

- In respect to how Tower Hamlets compared with other local authorities, in terms of caseloads and new referrals, Mr Baldwin said it was comparative to trends seen nationally and regionally. He said the Corporate Director for Children and Culture met on a regular basis with his counterparts from other London Boroughs and likewise he did the same. He said data from professional organisations and Ofsted gave them information on the national picture around benchmarking.
- **ACTION:** Members stated it would be useful to have actual data in a report showing what the trends were and how this compared with other comparative boroughs. Mr Baldwin said he would discuss this with Mr Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture and would bring the information requested to a future meeting of the sub-committee.

The Chair thanked the attendees for their contribution to the meeting and said their input had been invaluable, in helping members understand how social workers had supported vulnerable children and families.

The Chair summarised the main points of discussions as follows:

1. For the Sub-Committee to receive a written report on data trends and how Tower Hamlets compares with other comparative boroughs, in relation to the referrals and caseload to see if the right families/people are being supported.
2. Examples were given of the innovative methods used to support vulnerable children and families however would any of the new methods evolve into permeant changes to social work and could this lead of efficiencies, with social workers spending less time travelling or is face to face visits the best method to engage with young people. Councillor White said this ought to be discussed at a future meeting of the sub-committee.

4.2 Regional Adoption Agency

The Chair introduced this item and said a few years ago, central government had instructed local authorities to regionalise their adoption arrangements. Therefore, the adoption team at Tower Hamlets became part of the regional adoption agency called Adopt London East (ALE).

Mr Baldwin stated ALE had been in operation for about two years, with several areas including adoption moving to the regional agency. He introduced Ms Lissa Marie Minnis, the Service Manager for Fostering and Regulated Services and Ms Sue May, Team Manager at ALE, who gave a presentation to the sub-committee.

The key points from the presentation were:

- ALE was established in October 2019. At the beginning of the implementation phase there was a dip in performance however this has significantly improved.

- Explanation was provided regarding the categories A1 and A2. A1 referred to the time a child comes into care and the time it takes to place them with their adoptive family. A2 referred to the time from when a court order is received, which gives permission to place a child for adoption to the time the child is matched i.e. the time the agency decision maker has agreed that the adopters are suitable for the adoptive child.
- Tower Hamlets average is 138 days whereas the England average is 182 days. The target is 121 days. ALE had made significant progress over the past two years in relation to closing this gap.
- Explanation regarding performance figures was provided to the Sub-Committee. There had been an increase of two in relation to the number of children to be adopted for 2020/21.
- The number of adoptions per year had decreased but this was partially due to court delays during the pandemic and the slow pace of courts operating virtually during the first lockdown. Ms May provided an explanation for the court delays and said she had worked with East London courts to address the challenges faced. She said there was also an increase in the number of contested adoptions, and this had added to the delay, albeit it effected a small number of children.
- With respect to the number of approved adopter families, the figure for 2020/21 was thirteen. There had been a dip in the recruitment of suitable families which was due to the agency being set up. However, Ms Minnis added that the number of matches had gone up. They had worked in partnership with ALE and this year had placed 5 children under fostering for adoption regulations. She said this limited the number of unnecessary moves for the child, with the long-term goal of the child being adopted by the family who is fostering them.
- Historic figures showing the number of adopters was provided per borough. It was stated that figures are difficult to segregate as the agency worked on a regional basis. The number of adopters for 2020/21 had increased to 22 at the end of the financial year.
- Ms May stated the number of adopter approvals had taken longer than expected but this was the picture nationally as well as regionally. She said difficulties had been experienced in staffing the 'recruitment and assessment' team but this had been resolved. There were ten adopter assessments booked within the next two months and she was hopeful they had turned the curve regarding the number of adopter families available.
- Specific campaigns had been run to encourage more adopters from black communities, with children from black ethnicities waiting the longest for adoption.
- A breakdown showing the budget and contributions made by each local authority was provided. Ms Minnis stated there would be an increase in cost for Tower Hamlets, due to an increase in demand for adoption services.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- In reply to what had become harder and what had got easier since regionalisation, Ms Minnis said Covid-19 had impacted the relationship they were developing with ALE. She said they had heavily invested in the success of the Agency so were focussed on making it work. Ms Minnis said meetings had become more difficult with teams based in different offices, with low attendance despite meetings being virtual. She said the demand for adopters and finding families was a challenge, but issues were resolved quickly to ensure there was no slippage in service.
- Ms May said the relationships with the children social work teams was growing. ALE supported teams in preparation of their key decisions on whether a child should be placed for adoption. She said close relationships were forming. A challenge for the agency was to understand the different organisational cultures, systems and structures each local authority had. Overall, there was a positive attitude in wanting to do what's best for the child and to work together to resolve issues.
- In response to if 22 adopter families was a low number of adoptees given the population of the east London boroughs, and if the families reflected the ethnic and religious mix required, Ms May responded saying 22 families was a relatively high number of families. She said ALE worked closely with other agencies in London and the voluntary sector and aimed to place children with families in London, as the child's extended community is London based.
- Ms May cited housing cost to be one of the reasons why prospective adopters were insufficient in number. She said one of the requirements was to have a spare bedroom and whilst they had been flexible about this, this was nevertheless the requirement. She added other factors such as London's young, transient population impacted on the ability to recruit adopters.
- Ms May said ALE was working with other stakeholders to develop training packages for social workers so to increase learning and widen the scope of adopters. She said they were working with American leaders in the field to see what can be done to increase capacity and recruit adopters particularly black adopters, for black children.
- Ms May stated there were many Asian adopters available and whilst there was a large Asian population in the region, there were very few children who required adoption from this community. She said this was a tremendous success of the Asian community.
- In response to what structures for accountability and oversight were in place, Ms May said the ALE reported to the partnership Board which comprised of the Directors who delegated their powers of decision down to Assistant Directors. She said the Board was attended by the Corporate Director for Children and Culture Mr Thomas and the Divisional Director for Children's Mr Richard Baldwin. Ms May

explained all decisions such as budget, staffing and performance were discussed with the board.

- With respect to Member involvement, Ms May said it would be through meetings of the sub-committee that oversight would be provided. She said the sub-committee would receive six monthly updates on performance as well as the annual report of the ALE, which was required by regulation. Ms Minnis added on a local level the Permanency summit scrutinised and tracked all permanency cases to ensure any dips or drifts in performance could be quickly challenged and resolved.

The Chair thanked the attendees for their contribution to the meeting and said their input had been invaluable, in helping members understand the work of the regional adoption agency.

The Chair summarised the main points of discussions as follows:

1. Data from ALE had been impacted by Covid-19 and therefore it would be useful for the Sub-Committee to see data once normality had returned, in order to better understand the progress being made. The Chair said the sub-committee would appreciate a further report on this at a future meeting.
2. Oversight and input from members was important and therefore the presence of members on adoption panels was crucial. It helped members to understand individual cases, colouring the data and contextualise the figures being provided.

4.3 Children's Social Care and Early Help Update

Councillor Asma Begum, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Children, Youth Services and Education introduced this item and said there would be a presentation from Mr Richard Baldwin, Divisional Director for Children Social Care followed by Officers from the service who would provide the Sub-Committee with an update on the Early Help service.

Mr Baldwin gave a presentation outlining the current position for the Early Help Service, the assurance mechanisms in place and the future developments for the service. He said the service was monitoring demand because they envisaged a higher need post-Covid19 and lockdown. He said the service was last inspected in the summer of 2019 and inspection of the service was never far away. He said the likelihood of further inspections with a focussed visit from Ofsted, a SEND inspection and Youth Justice inspection in the next twelve months. Mr Baldwin continued stating that performance data was monitored and challenged via various assurance processes such as the Improvement Board, Performance Surgeries as well as through peer reviews. He said continued efforts were being made to strengthen practice, by analysing data to ensure the quality of practice was excellent.

The Sub-Committee then heard from Mr Mohammed Jolil, Interim Head of Early Help, Nicola Mutale, Early Help Operations Manager and Karen Simpson, Early Help Coordinator.

The key points made by the Early Help Team were:

- The service helped families who did not meet the statutory thresholds, by getting involved as early as possible, with interventions to help those were in need.
- The Early Help service faced similar challenges described by social work colleagues. Face to face meetings had moved to an online platform, during the pandemic. Communication by phone and online were the methods used to engage with families, such as those shielding who required medicine and food assistance.
- 70% of referral were made via the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) process of which 60% were from the police. Cases were assessed by the MASH team who decided if the social care thresholds were met and if not, cases would be referred to the Early Help Team.
- Approximately 500 calls per week are received by the helpline of which 300 families are supported on a long-term basis over a period of six to nine months. Action plans for the families are put in place and those that are borderline are referred to the Social Inclusion Panel.
- The Early Help Hub is the front door service for accessing early help services. The hub operated a reduced service from the Town Hall throughout the pandemic as well as a phone line service to the community, their families, and other professionals within the local authority.
- Creative approaches had been used to reach out to families. For example, refugee families who had moved to the borough. They had been supported by providing housing, food vouchers as well as access to education.
- The Early Years' Service worked with the voluntary sector and weekly meetings were held with the Home Office on the next steps to improve outcomes for these families.
- One of the positives from the pandemic was the concept of 'the team around the family' which involved several professional coming together to support a family. Meetings were easier to conduct virtually especially given the time strains for healthcare professionals such as GPs.
- The pandemic had provided the opportunity to build relationships with partners and this had become a real strength. Virtual working had enabled teams to support families in a holistic way with everyone pooling resources and working together to support vulnerable people. For example, the Family Liaison team had supported the Royal London Hospital by being the first point of contact for doctors trying to support families, who had loved ones in intensive care and/or coma.
- The service had also supported families where individuals who had lost their jobs; parents who were unwell and were struggling financially by

signposting people and helping with benefit claims to making referrals to food banks and supporting those who were shielding.

- The Early Help transition service had supported parents with children aged over eleven and found parent involvement to be a positive. The school social work service was provided to 12 schools who buy into the service.
- Additional funding had been secured from the DfE whereby Tower Hamlets had been selected for a pilot. Sixteen schools were involved with eight being provided with a social worker in school. The purpose was to reduce the number of children coming into social care and the number of referrals made by dealing with issues locally. Due to the lockdown the pilot had been extended for another year until March 2022.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- Access to food was a big issue a few months ago and whilst the council has provided additional support for this, what has happened regarding access to food for refugees? The Sub-Committee were informed the Home Office allowed for a £5 voucher per day to be issued to individuals which they could use in Tesco's. However, conversations were taking place with the Home Office asking them to replace this with the Aspen Card, which would give families more choice as to where they purchase food from. Ms Mutale said refugees were accessing food banks in the borough as well as in neighbouring boroughs and as such Hackney had been invited to a multi-agency meeting.
- There were two pathways in relation to access to social workers in schools. The first was the buy-in service, where schools purchase their social worker from the Council and the other was the pilot with the DfE. The DfE were paying for the eight social workers to be in the secondary schools.
 - **ACTION:** Leaflet explaining the purpose of the pilot to be shared with Members of the Sub-Committee.
- The Sub-Committee were informed Tower Hamlets had been chosen for the pilot following a robust application process and results from the study were being fed back to Cardiff University who were taking forward the project. Mr Jolil said he's be happy to come to a future meeting to share the midway and final evaluations.
- **ACTION:** The Sub-Committee asked for the results of the pilot to be shared with them at a future meeting showing

The Sub-Committee then heard from Mr Sam Nair, Head of the Social Work Academy.

Mr Nair said the Academy was an enabling organisation which sat behind the social care mandate, whose goal was to support teams and change the

culture of the organisation to provide excellent services. He said the Academy had five objectives from enabling social workers to ensure practise excellence to investing in a more stable permanent workforce as well as creating a culture of innovation.

Mr Nair said one of the key challenges was the recruitment of social workers and said at the beginning of 2018, 39.5% of staff were agency workers, which meant the budget was overspent. Over the last few years this had gradually improved to 13.2% agency staff, with over 87% permanent staff over the last year. Mr Nair said over 94 people had been recruited when the target was 45 people. He said what whilst several local and neighbouring boroughs had struggled with turnover and recruitment, Tower Hamlets had benefitted. He said that this was due to the culture shift in the organisation with staff feeling more confident working for the borough. He said their strategy going forward was to have specific campaigns such as 'refer a friend', with online campaigning getting people who know people to come and join. He said the aim for the next one to two years was to get 90 to 95% permanent workforce.

- Members had no questions for Mr Nair.

The Chair thanked the attendees for their contribution to the meeting and said their input had been invaluable, in helping members understand the work of the Early Help team and the recruitment of permanent social workers.

The Chair summarised the main points of discussions as follows:

1. That the results from the DfE pilot be shared with the Sub-Committee at a future meeting; and
2. The access to food for vulnerable families.

5. ANY OTHER UNRESTRICTED BUSINESS CONSIDERED TO BE URGENT

No other business was discussed at the meeting.

The meeting ended at 7.27 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Bex White
Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee