

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

HELD AT 5.33 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 9 FEBRUARY 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) Representative of Church of England
Councillor Gabriela Salva Macallan
Councillor Kyrsten Perry
Councillor Helal Uddin
Councillor Andrew Wood

Co-opted Members Present:

Joanna Hannan – Representative of Diocese of Westminster

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Asma Begum - Lead Member for Children and Schools

Apologies:

Neil Cunningham - Parent Governor

Others Present:

Tracy Smith – CEO, Tower Hamlets Education Partnership
Paul Wood – Headteacher, Stepney All Saints School
Oliver Woodward – Headteacher, Columbia Primary School
Kim Arrowsmith – Matchbox Day Nursery
Toni Evans – Lincoln Hall Preschool
Gill Oliver – Winterton House Nursery

Officers Present:

Christine McInnes – (Divisional Director, Education and Partnerships)
Layla Richards – (Head of Strategy and Policy – Children and Culture)
Jonathan Solomons – (Strategy and Policy Manager - Children and Culture)
James Thomas – (Corporate Director, Children and

Pauline Hoare	– Culture)
	– (Head of the Integrated Early Years Service)
Farhana Zia	– (Democratic Services Officer, Committees, Governance)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Mr Neil Cunningham, Parent Governor gave apologies for absence.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

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

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes from the previous meeting of 15th December 2020 were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting.

4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

4.1 Impact of Covid 19 on children's learning

The Sub-Committee received a verbal update on the impact Covid-19 is having on education in the borough, the steps taken to minimize disruption to children and the support provided to schools.

The Sub-Committee heard from Ms Christine McInnes, Divisional Director of Education and Partnership who stated schools had worked hard to meet the dual demands of having children of critical workers and vulnerable children in school as well as developing and running online learning packages for children at home. In addition to this, secondary schools have had to establish testing programmes for pupils. She said the Tower Hamlets Education Partnership (THEP) was analysing the evidence base on how schools can assess the learning gaps amongst different year groups and children and what could be done to address this. Ms McInnes said the lack of digital access and broadband had also impacted on individual students.

The Sub-Committee heard from Tracy Smith, Executive Director, Tower Hamlets Education Partnership (THEP) and Headteachers Mr Oliver Woodward, Headteacher of Columbia Primary School and Mr Paul Woods, Stepney All Saints School on their experience of dealing with the impact Covid-19 was having on schools.

Tower Hamlets Education Partnership

Ms Smith said the lockdown this time had been very different to the lockdown experienced in March 2020. She said teachers were more prepared, with a better-quality offer being in place than before.

The key points made by Ms Smith were:

- Since the return to school in September 2020, bubble closures had led to schools honing their remote learning practice.
- THEP had conducted a survey of schools to better understand the gaps in access to digital devices. There were six reports available on their website looking at Maths, English and Science in primary schools. Study programmes and resources were tailored to support the teacher in delivering the learning.
- Ms Smith cautioned against labelling children as the 'lost generation' and said language like this was unhelpful. She said children were resilient and THEP would continue to work with schools to close the gaps in learning.
- Schools were working together to share good practice with ten different clusters of schools sharing their ideas. Work was being driven through subject networks in primary schools and 'teach and meet' groups in secondary schools as well as peer review models.
- Access of devices was a problem, especially in areas where schools had a more disadvantaged community. Of the schools surveyed 64 responses had been received from which it was clear that at least 10,000 devices across the borough were needed to ensure every child has access to their own device.
- Schools were tracking the usage of devices and were sympathetic to the dilemmas facing families, especially if a single device was being shared by siblings.
- THEP had been fortunate to receive a £53,000 donation which it had used to procure IT equipment for distribution to primary schools. THEP was working alongside the Education Business partnership who had delivered 150 devices to local schools, however a lot more were needed.

Columbia Primary School

Mr Oliver Woodward, Headteacher at Columbia Primary School addressed the Sub-Committee and shared his experience of operating his School during the pandemic.

The key points made by Mr Woodward were:

- Columbia Primary School had been fortunate in that it hadn't experienced any bubble closures since the opening of schools in September 2020, and therefore hadn't experienced the full onset of remote learning during that period.
- In preparedness for January 2021 the school approached remote learning by easing children and families into this gradually. A quarter of the children in each year group, approximately 15 children, were still coming into school with the remaining accessing learning from home.
- Daily activities included a live register session each morning via Zoom or Google meets. Story time after lunch, with the class teacher reading a story plus well-being challenges being offered every week. Independent reading activities and typing practice also form part of the

everyday things children take part in, as well as curriculum topics of English, Maths, Phonics.

- One of the ways in which the School will be tackling the learning gap, is by using its most experienced teachers to work on a one to one basis with disadvantaged children or small groups of children to focus on maths, phonics or reading.
- The learning delivered is reviewed weekly, during the staff meeting. For example, in KS1 there is a real focus on early reading and phonics, with a broader curriculum for the older children in KS2, focussing on areas which will make a substantial difference to a child's progress and attainment.
- Overall, the school is happy with the offer provided to children but are aiming to incorporate fun activities for children such as a scavenger hunt around the home to get children and classmates playing and interacting together.

Stepney All Saints School

Mr Paul Woods, Headteacher at Stepney All Saints School then addressed the Sub-Committee and shared his experience of operating his School during the pandemic.

The key points made by Mr Woods were:

- Stepney All Saint's school had been open to key worker and vulnerable children since the first lockdown in March 2020. The home learning provision provided has evolved over time.
- Lessons were initially uploaded on Google meets and Google Classrooms, with the expectation that students would regulate their own activity by accessing the online work and submitting this to the teacher. However, teachers are now more active and accustomed to using technology to conduct lessons and therefore there is a greater online presence. Tweaks have been made along the way, with breaks introduced between lessons.
- The positives from the home learning experience has been the re-launch of their AAE (Application, Analysis, and Evaluation) Strategy. Mr Wood said the school had struggled with the notion of pre-learning but had introduced their strategy when students returned in September 2020.
- 60% of the school's intake are children on pupil premium and therefore the school was committed to ensuring equality of access to all students. As a VA school the trustees agreed to fund the procurement of new laptops and all students in Year 7 to Year 13 have been issued with individual laptops.
- Mr Woods said students were resilient and were more focussed on their learning and had a positive attitude to learning online albeit they and their teachers are keen to be back in the classroom.
- Mr Wood praised THEP for their support over the lockdown period.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- The use of technology would last beyond the pandemic, with every Year 7 and Year 12 student being issued with a laptop. It would be an integral part of the teaching and learning strategy at Stepney All Saint's school.
- In response to if the 10,000 laptops required were in addition to the government devices handed to Tower Hamlets, Ms Smith confirmed these would be on top of the DfE provision. The types of devices required, were laptops and Chromebooks. Demand is high so locally schools are fundraising or securing donations from existing partnerships.
- In response to if there is a criteria for the allocation of devices, Mr Woodward said they were initially promised 51 devices, were then told they would receive 10, before 51 devices were allocated by the DfE. He said the current challenge are those children who do not fit the 'pupil premium' criteria but live in substantially disadvantaged circumstances.
- Mr Woodward stated that all children were engaging and accessing online learning however the time spent maybe limited due to issues with shared devices. Younger children were being provided with paper copies, to help balance out demand for devices and parent time to supervise youngsters.
- Mr Woodward said lessons had been tailored to ensure engagement was across the year group, class and individually. He said staff had pinpointed the children who were struggling and made phone calls to remind them to log on in the morning or during the day. He said they had introduced a regular 'drop in' where children can ask their teacher for help on subject's they are learning via Google meets.
- In response to how the Council could do more to support schools, given the budget constraints faced by schools and local government, Mr Wood said he felt THEP and Christine McInnes had supported local schools really well. He said when emerging from the lockdown support would be needed on 'catch up' and assessment of Year 10 and Year 12 students. He said it would be unfair for the Government to expect students to sit exams, given the pandemic. He said overplanning was a mistake as things seemed to change within a 24-hour period. Mr Wood recommended the lobbying of government and Ofqual to resolve this issue.
- Ms Smith concurred with Mr Wood and said the notion of recovery and catch up in education should never be driven by assessment. The curriculum should be served by assessment. Ms Smith said the danger was, if the Government did not budge on exams and assessments, there would be a massive gap in learning because children had not been in school. Ms Smith said collectively teachers and the local authority needed to bring their experience and wisdom to the debate.
- Mr Woodward added assistance with the procurement of laptop devices for primary schools would help his school and others.
- He said one of the big issues experienced related to families who fall outside of pupil premium and who required assistance with food. Not

everyone was entitled to free school meals (FSM). The school community had aided such families with food parcels and food vouchers, but additional support was required.

- Not all teaching staff have access to IT Equipment themselves and the quality of the equipment can cause issues, such as cameras and microphones not functioning. There had been a shortfall for Teaching Assistant's, who would not normally require IT equipment but THEP are hoping to address this with the additional laptops it had procured.
- In response to if the headteachers had a recovery plan in place and how this would address child poverty especially around the access to food; and if school kitchens were supplying food in addition to food vouchers, Mr Woodward said their school kitchen was open and cooking food for the children that were in school. He said they had used the Councils FSM voucher scheme and had provided food parcels during the first lockdown.
- Mr Woodward said school staff had assisted and raised awareness amongst parents regarding FSM. He said confusion existing because the national scheme provided FSM from Reception to Year 3, and some parents are under the impression that entitlement continued, without realising they need to apply again for Year 4 to 6.
- Councillor Begum, Cabinet Member for Children and Schools added the local authority were working on a communications strategy aimed at encouraging families to apply for FSM.

The Chair thanked the attendees for their contribution to the meeting and said their input had been invaluable to members in understanding the situation in schools.

The Chair summarised the main points of discussion as follows:

1. Gap in access to IT equipment, with 10,000 devices required in Tower Hamlets. Commendable efforts had been made to close the gap, but the gap still existed.
2. Innovative work had been undertaken in schools to ensure children are engaged and learning.
3. Schools are the frontline of engagement with families and provide more than education. They are trusted organisations in the local community and as such Members must be aware of the pressures facing schools. Increasingly they are providing for the basics of life such as food and safety.
4. Role for the local authority, to communicate to families their entitlement to FSM.

4.2 Early Years Provision

The Chair introduced this item and stated the Sub-Committee wanted to focus and understand the take up of Early Year Provision by different demographic groups.

She said the parent Overview and Scrutiny Committee had held sessions, approximately 18 months ago looking at aspiration and achievement and whilst Tower Hamlets had a good track record in terms of the excellent progress children made in schools, the crux of progression and attainment lied in Early Year Provision and access to it.

The Chair, Ms Bex White said she wanted to focus on the take up by white working-class communities as data showed this to be low. She said the progression made by white working-class boys was a concern because there was a significant gap when children entered primary school. She continued saying she was aware of the funding and sustainability issues faced by the sector and wanted to understand the experience of providers in the sector, during the pandemic.

Ms Pauline Hoare, Head of Integrated Early Years Service made a presentation to the Sub-Committee. The key points made by Ms Hoare were:

- The Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA) indicated the pandemic was having a negative impact on childcare take up. There had been a fall from 64% to 42% for eligible 2-year olds taking up the offer.
- Early year funding (EL2) is free early year education funded by the government. The DfE shares data on children who are eligible and the DWP provide a list of those eligible for universal credit. Ethnicity data is not provided.
- Take up has been affected by the pandemic and issues such as mental health, emotional wellbeing and low levels of early language acquisition are the key challenges. Mitigation of this is through early education and childcare provision.
- Some of the barriers are overcrowded accommodation, shared accommodation with elders, parental nervousness due to Covid-19 and school closures preventing young children attending childcare.
- Reduction in national funding will impact locally, with the number of places on offer decreasing. Post Covid-19 there is the likelihood childcare setting will accommodate 3-4 year olds as it attracts higher funding than 2 year olds.
- Tower Hamlets has 82 childcare providers, 120 childminders who work with the Children Centres in the borough.

The Sub-Committee then heard from Ms Kim Arrowsmith, Matchbox Day Nursery, Ms Toni Evans, Lincoln Hall Preschool and Ms Gill Oliver, Winterton House Nursery of the issues facing them in the pandemic.

The key points raised were:

- There had been a dramatic decrease in the number of children attending childcare settings, particularly 2-year olds. Ms Arrowsmith stated they had seen a drop from 98 children to 70 children, considering the social distancing rules. Ms Oliver stated numbers at her Nursery had fallen to 98 children from a 140 and Ms Evans stated

the ratio of staff to child had been affected by the cases of Covid-19 at their nursery, resulting in less provision being provided.

- Nurseries had innovated by offering virtual classes however pressure on prioritising IT for older children meant the very young missed out. Packs for home learning had been provided to parents however it was uncertain if these had made a difference.
- Gaps in social communication skills and language development were envisaged for children transition to primary school.
- One of the biggest worries was income, especially with EL2 funding and the fear small to medium sized providers would feel the economic downturn.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- Barriers in take up of childcare places can be attributed to the general fear parents have about Covid-19 and the lockdown, plus anxiety of passing the virus to elderly grandparents in the extended family. The uptake of the vaccination, which stands at 37% had assisted in allaying some of those fears and parental confidence is growing.
- The main barrier to take up is the hourly rate. This can be a significant disincentive. Tower Hamlets pays £6.50 per hour. Others pay £4.00 per hour. Ms Hoare said a significant amount of work would be required by the providers and council to re-encourage parents to take up places.
- Regarding the decrease in the London population and if this was reflected in the take up of places in early years, Ms Hoare said the population decrease affected all age groups and the figures from the DfE and DWP showed this drop. For example, last year more than 2500 children were eligible but currently there were 1785 children.
- Ms Hoare explained her service would have difficulty in providing a place to every parent and said the sufficiency strategy developed by the council in consultation with the providers, was to advertise and encourage take up at a slightly higher level than the current take up, so that businesses can grow. Ms Hoare said if too many places were created small fragile businesses were at risk of collapse. She said it was a complex situation.
- In respect to vaccinations, Ms Hoare said the government had not prioritised staff in these settings or offered them vaccinations as they had done with school staff. The nursery managers concurred with this view and said their staff felt forgotten and undervalued by government. Locally they had received a letter of appreciation from the Mayor.
- Ms Hoare said they did not have information on the number of parents who were furloughed but it was clear to her service that there was going to be funding challenges facing childcare providers with a significant reduction in the number of places available. She said parents who are currently furloughed may find the childcare setting closed or greater demand for limited places when they return to work.
- Ms Arrowsmith added her nursery had seen a drop in the number of days children attended especially where parents had been furloughed.

She said places could not be held open indefinitely because as a business the nursery needed to secure income.

- The nursery managers confirmed the price of PPE had increased fifth fold with the purchasing of basics such as gloves, anti-bac and aprons costing substantially more money. Ms Arrowsmith said this was the general picture and was not related to supply and demand issues. Manufactures and sellers had inflated their prices knowing nurseries were obligated in purchasing these items.
- Ms Hoare said some practical assistance had been provided by the council through the Silver Employment Group and said she would share the email sent by colleagues. She encouraged the nursery managers to apply for the financial help on offer.
- **ACTION:** Ms Hoare to provide a description of the offer made by the Silver Employment group to members of the sub-committee.
- In response to what the experience had been with 'settling in' 2-year olds, Ms Oliver said this was one of the positives of lockdown. She said they had changed their process which meant parents had to remain in one room, whilst the child got to know the staff and nursery. Ms Arrowsmith and Ms Evans stated they had similar experiences in settling in new children and overall children were settling in a lot quicker.
- In response to what the Council can do to coordinate a response to central government about PPE, Ms Hoare and the nursery managers said they would welcome the lobbying of central government about the issue of PPE along with access to testing and vaccinations.

The Chair thanked the attendees for their contribution to the meeting and said their input had been invaluable to members in understanding the situation in early year settings.

The Chair summarised the main points of discussion as follows:

1. Funding of early year provision was critical to providers as well as families. The challenge was to ensure places were maintained and capacity building was at a pace that businesses can survive the financial strain of the pandemic.
2. Access to devices for very young children to aid their learning with language acquisition and play.
3. The learning gap created by the pandemic particularly the children transitioning to primary school and babies born in 2020/21 and their social interaction outside the family. The Sub-Committee needs to monitor the progress on this.
4. Improved settling process, due to changes made to processes.

Recommendations

1. The Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee recommends the Mayor and the lead member for Children and Schools to continue lobbying for early years funding and the expansion of EL2 funding, because babies born in 2020/2021 will face additional challenges such

as speech and language acquisition. Children who haven't had real interaction from the day of their birth with other children and other people will require additional help when they are two-and three-year olds.

2. The Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee recommends the Early Years Service to closely monitor the impact the various different trends will have such de-population and if this is to the detriment of EL2 provision. More families may be entitled to EL2 provision due to unemployment and poverty owing to the pandemic. The demographics should be monitored closely to ensure children who are eligible are drawn from across the different communities in Tower Hamlets.
3. The Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee recommends the Lead Member for Children and Schools and Lead Member for Health and Wellbeing to look at the issues related to PPE, vaccinations and testing and consider if they can bulk purchase PPE to help smaller providers.

4.3 Inspection update

Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director of Children and Culture provided an updated on forthcoming inspections. Mr Thomas said there were three separate inspection regimes that directly inspected services within the Directorate.

- SEND Inspection
- Youth Justice Inspection and
- ILCAS

Mr Thomas provided a brief summary of each inspection:

The SEND inspection was a local area inspection undertaken jointly by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC). A considerable amount of fieldwork is included with visits to schools, interviews with parents as well as a range of health providers. Mr Thomas said that due to the pandemic inspections were on hold however the inspectorates were hoping to resume their inspections in April 2021, depending on if this was viable.

He said a narrative judgement is provided by way of letter and there is a benchmark which needs to be achieved. Mr Thomas said if the inspectorates are unhappy with local provision a 'written statement of action' is received which defines the aspects which require improvement. He said Tower Hamlets were in the last cohort of Councils to be inspected in a five-year cycle, so he expected the inspection to happen this year. Mr Thomas continued saying their plans with their partners for the inspection were significantly impacted by the pandemic however they were working hard over the last four to five months to recover ground. He said of the three inspection, this one would be the most challenging.

In relation to the other two inspections, Mr Thomas said these were more straightforward. The Youth Justice Inspection would be undertaken by HMIP and will inspect the Council who is the lead agency in delivering youth offending but would also involve an element of multi-agency inspection with the City of London. He said the inspection is unlikely to be before April but could be expected anytime thereafter. He said he was confident about this inspection as a considerable amount of preparatory work had been done such as external peer reviews and work on performance indicators.

Referring to the ILACS inspection, Mr Thomas said children's social care were familiar with the framework of this inspection which would normally follow a three-year cycle. He said a visit from Ofsted occurs every year and in the third year there is a full inspection. Mr Thomas said if there was a focus visit, he was confident with their preparations, as it looked at one specific area. The JTAI involved more work, as it would involve a multi-agency inspection looking at multiple areas. Mr Thomas said he had updated the partners of the Safeguarding Partnership on the three core inspections.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- Mr Thomas said that of the three inspections the SEND inspection would be the most challenging. He said if the inspectorate came in April, he would expect some criticism has not all the improvements that had been identified and driven through. He said an inspection later on in the year would give them more time. He said this was a council priority not just for the Children's Directorate but also the Health and Wellbeing Board, who have agreed to receive regular updates on the progress made.
- Regarding the other two inspections, Mr Thomas said he was reasonably confident there would be no surprises.

The Chair thanked Mr Thomas for this presentation and update and said the Sub-Committee would like to receive a further update at its next meeting in April 2021.

5. ANY OTHER UNRESTRICTED BUSINESS CONSIDERED TO BE URGENT

No other business was discussed at the meeting.

The meeting ended at 7.35 p.m.

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