



**Officers In Attendance Virtually:**

Daniel Kerr	(Strategy and Policy Manager)
Steve Nyakatawa	(Director of Education)
John O'Shea	Support and Learning Service, Early Years
Tony Parker	(Head of Service for the Children's Joint Commissioning Team)
Layla Richards	(Head of Strategy and Policy – Children and Culture)
James Thomas	(Corporate Director, Children and Culture)
Warwick Tomsett	Joint Director, Integrated Commissioning
Susannah Beasley-Murray	Director of Supporting Families
Jill McGinley	Head of Parent and Family Support
Jenny Miller	Manager, Family Information and Support Service

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Helal Uddin, sub-committee member and Cllr Asma Begum, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet member for Children, Youth Services and Equalities.

**2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

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

**3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the previous meeting of 21<sup>st</sup> October and 8<sup>th</sup> December 2021 were agreed to be an accurate record of the meetings and were approved by the Sub-Committee.

**4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION**

**4.1 Covid 19 Update**

The Sub-Committee received a verbal update in relation to the continued impact Covid-19 was having on children and young people in Tower Hamlets.

Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children & Culture introduced the item and stated all services were working in partnership to deliver the 'bounce back' strategic initiative. He said there were three distinct themes, (1) Bounce back with learning (2) Bounce back through play and (3) Bounce back with support.

Mr Thomas said they were in the recovery stage from the Omicron variant of Covid-19, and as Chair of the Safeguarding Partnership's silver group they

were looking closely at the impact the recent strain was having on social care services as well as schools. He said they needed to understand the demand and needs of children and families. He said there were five areas they were focussing on: (1) Early years and the lack of opportunities to socialise (2) mental health and emotional wellbeing (3) Domestic abuse and violence (4) family poverty and (5) SEND children and families.

Mr Steve Nyakatawa, Director of Education then provided the Sub-Committee with an update on the impact the latest variant was having on Education. Mr Nyakatawa said one of the key pressures was the absence of staff during the term and the shortage of agency staff to cover those absences. He said he was pleased no schools had been closed during the autumn term, with senior leadership teams reconfiguring classes and taking on teaching roles. He said schools were perusing the 'Every Child Online' campaign to ensure the issue of digital poverty was being addressed. Mr Nyakatawa said the Tower Hamlets Emotional Wellbeing Service had been providing support to children and schools.

Mr Nyakatawa stated they were working with the Tower Hamlets Education Partnership (THEP) to identify and support children with gaps in their reading and maths. He said THEP was supporting school leaders to address these gaps as well as support children taking exams over the Summer.

The Sub-Committee then heard from Ms Beasley- Murray Director of Supporting Families who stated that she had seen clear examples of good practice, since joining Tower Hamlets. She said the feedback from families, chairs and social workers was positive and showed how creatively everyone was working to protect and safeguard children. She said performance had dipped over Christmas due to the Omicron variant, with 77.6% of visits being completed within four weeks however this had recovered in January 2022 to 90%. Likewise, child protection visits had slightly dipped from 94.4% within 10 working days but had now recovered to 96.6%. Ms Beasley-Murray said they continued to put focus on performance and sickness rates and would be monitoring caseloads and impact on staff. Ms Beasley-Murray said the recruitment and retention of staff, whilst not an issue during the pandemic, was seeing a shift with many members of staff deciding to take a career break or return to visit family over an extended period. Ms Beasley-Murray said this shift was not unique to Tower Hamlets however they would work with the Social Work Academy to ensure staffing levels were maintained.

In response to questions and comments from members the following was noted:

- The Chair stated it was apparent the pandemic had had a huge impact on children and young people as well as on the workforce. She said this would have a lasting impact for a long time and thanked Officers for highlighting the issues.
- In response to what staffing levels would be like for February/March 2022, Mr Thomas responded stating the impact of staffing absences

had eased over the second half of January however in terms of staff turnover, the Supporting Families Team was still in a favourable position. The locum rates were below the London average.

- Ms Beasley-Murray added the recruitment and retention of new qualified social workers and those with one or two-years' experience and Team Managers was stable. She said social workers with five or more years of experience were the ones who were leaving the service. She said five people in the MASH and assessment teams had given their notice. She said they were looking to recruit permanent staff and said staff were encouraged to move cross specialism within social work.
- Councillor Wood stated that whilst it was helpful to hear a verbal update on the recruitment and retention of staff, he would like to see a report to the sub-committee, on a regular basis on how stable the workforce is, with figures and percentages provided showing the increase or decrease and the effect this was having in delivering social work to families in need.
- Councillor Salva-Macallan, agreed with Councillor Wood and said a dashboard highlighting the recruitment and retention of social workers was required especially given the proposed cuts to specialist posts such as those supporting African families and Muslim communities. She asked if the risk, because of the cuts is being measured. Mr Thomas said there wasn't any additional instability to specialist roles, despite the overall reduction in capacity. He said they had not moved rapidly to make a cut and were assessing the situation.
- Councillor Bex White said the dashboard was being worked on by the Directorate and information would be provided to members of the sub-committee, in the new municipal year.
- **ACTION:** Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture to provide a note to the Sub-Committee members on staffing levels and the impact the pandemic has had within the next two to three weeks.

The Chair summarised the main point of the discussion as follows:

1. The Children's Directorate had worked extremely hard over the pandemic to help support families in need and would continue to do so. The Corporate Director to provide a written update to Members of the Sub-Committee in relation to the staffing levels for teams within the Directorate.

#### 4.2 Special Education Needs and Disability

The Chair Councillor Bex White appraised the Sub-Committee with the aims of the scrutiny session and said the Sub-Committee would first hear from services users; second comment on the written statement of action, following

the Ofsted Inspection and ways to improve the quality of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP's) and thirdly the Directorate's action plan.

The Sub-Committee then heard from Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture who stated that meeting the needs of children and young people especially those with Special Educational Needs and Disability was an absolute priority for the Safeguarding partnership. Mr Thomas said a joined-up system which met the range of need was crucial. He said as the Chair of the SEND Improvement Board, it was vital the voices of children and young people were at the centre of the improvement work. He said whilst positive outcomes, in particular educational outcomes were above the national average, improvement was required in relation to EHCP plans. He said many services fell short of expectation and work of underway to improve the user experience.

### ***Service Users Perspective***

The Sub-Committee received a presentation from Ms Sornnaly Hossain, a Young Person with SEND and a member of 'Our Time Youth Forum.' Ms Hossain was supported by Ms Jenny Miller, manager of the Family Information and Support Service.

The main points to note were:

- Ms Sornnaly Hossain explained the achievements of the forum and the different activities the forum has been involved in. The presentation highlighted the challenges faced by SEND young people and the future aims of the forum.
- She said it was vital the voices of young people with SEND were heard and were listened to when shaping new policies or services.
- Ms Hossain highlighted the ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder) cards the Our Time Forum had designed in collaboration with the Council and NHS.

The Sub-Committee then heard from Ms Sam Gager, Chair of the Independent Parent and Carer Forum.

The main points made by Ms Gager were:

- Parents of SEND children were at breaking point, because of the curtailments made to services during the pandemic and lockdown. She said many parents were finding it hard to cope with the daily pressures of managing and caring for SEND children.
- She said the Council needed to re-examine the respite offer available to parents. She said provision should be tailored to meet the different requirements and needs of every family, rather than be a 'one size fits all' solution.

- Ms Gager said it was important for parent representation on the various different Boards and forums, especially on CAMHS services so the voice of parents and children with SEND is heard.

In answer to questions and comments from members the following was noted:

- In response to what Councillors could do to help the Our Time Forum in their campaign for change, Ms Hossain said many children with SEND were isolated and therefore it would help if Councillors promoted inclusion and worked to dispel the ignorance about children with SEND conditions. She said bullying was a major trigger behind exclusion and more needed to be done to highlight this. Another factor which held back SEND children was access to work. Many employers were not positive and did not offer equal opportunities to those with disabilities.
- Councillor Salva Macallan said it was clear from the Ofsted Inspection that the voice of young people and their parents was required, to co-produce change and design of services. Councillor Salva Macallan asked if two places on the SEND Improvement Board for young people and parents were enough especially when addressing the action plan. Ms Miller responded saying they worked with the Our Time Forum members to collate views and felt they had representation at higher levels of the partnership. Ms Gager echoed this saying her Forum represented smaller groups. Having too many parents involved would overwhelm the work of the Improvement Board. Although parents should be invited when looking at specific topics and/or conditions.
- In response to if a list was available of all the small groups that feed into the Parent Forum, Ms Gager said, one had been stated pre-Covid but hadn't been maintained. Ms Gager said they were driving change through the Forum, and it was difficult to police individual groups. She said they sign posted people to relevant groups and organisations.
- Ms Hossain explained how she became involved with the 'Our Time Forum' and how she encourages others to join.
- Ms Gager further explained the improvements she envisaged in terms of respite. She said a physical centre for parents to meet was a good idea and a short break offering whole family respite had its place and purpose. However, she also believed more could be done by offering families flexible respite, such as free or discounted cinema and theatre tickets, that parents could use to unwind or spend time with other children/siblings within the family unit.
- **ACTION:** Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture to provide the Sub-Committee with a note outlining the respite care currently available.
- Mr Thomas said the Directorate was looking to recommission its respite offer and realised its relevance especially following the pandemic and how vital it is to ensure families have the support they need.
- Ms Gager echoed Ms Hossain's point about access to employment and said most employers do not understand the need of those with SEND

or cannot make physical changes to the workspace to accommodate young people with SEND.

The Chair thanked Ms Sonnaly Hossain and Ms Sam Gager for attending the Sub-Committee and expressing their views in relation to the SEND service.

### ***SEND Inspection and Improvement work***

The Sub-Committee heard from Mr Steve Nyakatawa, Director for Education, who provided an update about the remedial action taken to address the outcome of the Local Area inspection.

Mr Nyakatawa made a presentation to the Sub-Committee outlining the findings of the of the Local Area Inspection, the strengths and weakness identified by the inspectorate as well as the steps taken to address the recommendations made in the report. Mr Nyakatawa said there were four areas highlighted in the Written Statement of Action, that require improvement: (1) Quality and oversight of EHC Plans including the annual review process, (2) ASD assessment and diagnosis waiting times, (3) Speech and language provision, and (4) Communication between area leaders and parents. He said Senior leaders accepted the findings within the inspection letter and had redoubled their commitment to improvement.

Mr John O'Shea, Head of SEND provided a detailed explanation on the steps take to address the quality and oversight of EHC Plans including the annual review process. He said the Chair had alluded to the EHCP Plans of those who already had a Plan and if these were to be reviewed. Mr O'Shea reassured the Sub-Committee that these were being reviewed to ensure they met the current needs of SEND children and were being updated accordingly. He said the issue identified by the inspector related to the conversion of the old 'statements' to the EHCP plans and work was underway to address this. He said they were looking at the quality assurance and annual review processes so that they were robust and met current standards and expectations.

Mr Tony Parker, Interim Head of Children's Commissioning then addressed the Sub-Committee explaining the steps which had been taken to reduce the waiting times for ASD assessment and to review & improve the full holistic pathway for children and families pre, during and post diagnosis. Mr Parker said the ASD Pathway Review Group had two subgroups which included parent representatives. He said the CCG had invested an additional £278k over two years to support the ASDAS to increase capacity to complete the assessments backlog and reduce the overall waiting times for children and families which were greatly impacted by Covid-19 pandemic.

Lastly, Mr Nyakatawa, provided the Sub-Committee with an update on how the action plan included a workstream addressing communication with parents and local area leaders. He said a clear communication strategy which

encompassed the Local Offer, social media, Let's Talk SEND, SEND Newsletter (with spotlight contributions from parents/carers) and parents/carers' 'evenings' for children at key transition points, were all ways in which the Directorate hoped to improve communication with users and parents.

In response to questions and comments from members the following was noted:

- The Chair asked what support was provided by the Speech and Language Service to parents, where children have a known condition that affects their speech and language development. Mr Tony Parker responded saying the under 5's were provided with targeted support through children and family centres. He said families were supported when a diagnosis is made.
- Regarding the example specifically given by the Chair, relating to Downs Syndrome Mr James Dodds, Head of Children Communication Therapy and Clinical Lead for SEND, at Barts Health said there was a clear referral pathway, although more needed to be done to ensure clinical staff at hospitals were engaging with community teams. He said this was not consistent and required improvement.
- The Chair enquired who would be responsible for the overall communication between teams. She asked how the barriers were to be overcome. Mr Dodds responded stating it was for the NHS to coordinate and ensure there was a clear pathway to referral as well as sufficient community support. Mr Parker added it was a partnership which involved parent groups and as such the workstream was looking to improve the user experience of speech and language services.
- In response to how families are made aware of the support available, Mr Parker said services were primarily promoted through the 'local offer'. He said the website was being updated and was the one source of information. He said families were also being briefed on what was available through the Let's Talk SEND campaign and SEND newsletter.
- In response to if the 'growth' referred to in the Written Statement of Action was permanent staff or temporary, to deal with the backlog of ECHP's, Mr James Thomas said this was permanent for one year, for the catch-up work that was needed. He said much depended on the Council Budget which was being decided on.
- In response the 20-week target, Mr O'Shea said this had slipped owing to capacity issues as well as the impact of Covid-19. He said the improvement plan was specifically looking to reduce the backlog from 2019.
- **ACTION:** Councillor Salva Macallan asked if the Sub-Committee could receive a report detailing the number of ECHP plans outstanding, the timeline involved to resolve them, and the remedial action taken to update them. She said it was important for the Sub-Committee to

understand if the investment in permanent staff ought to be a short-term, or long-term endeavour.

- Referring to Appendix 2, of the Ofsted report, relating to governance Councillor Salva Macallan noted the Schools Forum were reporting to the SEND Improvement Board. She asked if the Schools Forum reported to the 'Tower Hamlets Together' partnership especially as the Schools Forum were responsible for the High-End Need funding. She said it was important for the partnership to have oversight of this budget. Mr James Thomas responded stating the SEND Improvement Board reported to the 'Tower Hamlets Together' partnership including information on budgets relating to high-end need. He said the partnership had oversight and scrutiny of those budgets.
- In response to if the SEND Improvement Board had the right balance of representation of the 'parent voice', and if a printed list of parent groups feeding into the Board could be provided, Mr James Thomas said the Board had been working with Ms Gager to strengthen the support provided to her Forum and her outreach work. He said she worked with varied groups which reported into the Parent Carer Group, but more could be done to work directly with groups.
- Mr Steve Nyakatawa, confirmed the Written Statement of Action had been circulated to staff groups. He said this had been done through communication from the Senior Leadership Team, as well as staff events. He said it had been shared widely across the Council.

The Chair thanked the attendees for their contribution to the meeting and said their input had been invaluable in helping members understand the outcomes of the SEND local area inspection and the actions taken to remedy the recommendation made within the report.

The Chair summarised the main points of discussion as follows:

1. The need to have a comprehensive list of the respite care offered to families with SEND children.
2. To recognise the important work the 'Our Time Forum' does, in terms of raising awareness and campaigning for children and young people with SEND needs.
3. The action plan detailing the SEND improvement work to be re-examined by the Sub-Committee in six-months' time to track the progress being made.
4. ECHP's and Workforce data indicator to be added to the dashboard being prepared by the Directorate.
5. To note the significance of bi-lingual staff in communicating with communities with SEND needs.
6. The NHS to redesign the referral pathways for speech and language, so to ensure they are engaging with community groups and centres.
7. To provide a snapshot of parent groups and how they feed into the Parent Forum.

8. Support required for SEND young people and their access to meaningful employment. The Sub-Committee to look at this in the next municipal year.
9. A watch to be kept on ASD investment made by Barts Health and if this has helped to reduce the backlog in assessments and waiting times.

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

The Chair asked Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture to provide a brief update in relation to the Independent Enquiry into Child Sex Abuse (IECSA).

Mr Thomas informed the Sub-Committee that IECSA had published a report in February reporting on child sexual exploitation by organised networks and web-based abuse. He said the review involved work done by councils and police, in six authorities during for 2017 2019. He said the report found significant weaknesses for that period. Mr Thomas reminded members that the Council had achieved a inadequate rating in the 2017 Ofsted inspection. He said IECSA recognised the positive improvements that had been made since then and said that tackling Child Sex Abuse, was a key priority for the Safeguarding Partnership, along with domestic abuse and violence and online safety.

Mr Thomas said the Safeguarding Partnership had signed off the Violence, Vulnerability and Exploitation strategy in Autumn 2020, with a dedicated child exploitation team involving multi-agencies. He said the partnership would be discussing the IECSA report at its next executive meeting in March and will consider the recommendations made in the report. He said it was clear they needed to further improve data collection and understand the issue locally, with particular focus on risk to children with disabilities.

The Chair recommended that the Sub-Committee look at the findings of the IECSA report and the response in the next municipal year, once Officers had had the chance to consider it.

The Chair thanked the Members and Officers of the Sub-Committee for their contributions over the year and said she believed the Sub-Committee had worked hard to make a difference to the lives of Children, young people and their families.

The meeting ended at 6.49 p.m.

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

