

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

HELD AT 5.30 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 15 DECEMBER 2020

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)

Councillor Gabriela Salva Macallan
Councillor Mohammed Pappu

Councillor Kyrsten Perry
Councillor Andrew Wood

Co-opted Members Present:

Neil Cunningham
Joanna Hannan

- Parent Governors
- Representative of Diocese of Westminster
- Parent Governors
- (Church of England Representative)

Ahmed Hussain
Dr Phillip Rice

Apologies:

Fatiha Kassouri

- Parent Governors

Others Present:

Tracy Smith

- CEO Tower Hamlets Education Partnership

Brenda Landers

- Headteacher, Swanlea Secondary School
- Headteacher, John Scurr Primary School

Paul Jackson

- Headteacher Manorfield Primary School

Elizabeth Marshall

- Bow Food Bank

Patrick Harrison

- Bow Food Bank

Az Odabashian

- Acting Detective Chief Inspector Public Protection (Met Police)

Chetan Vyas

- Director of Quality and Safety (WEL CCG)

Officers Present:

Ellie Kershaw

- (Tackling Poverty Programme Manager, Benefits)

Jonathan Solomons

- (Strategy and Policy Manager - Children and Culture)

Richard Baldwin

- (Divisional Director, Children's Social Care)

- James Thomas – (Corporate Director, Children and Culture)
- Joel West – (Democratic Services Team Leader (Committee))

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs Fatiha Kassouri, Parent Governor and Mr Keith Makin, Independent Scrutineer.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

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

3. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

Mr Ahmed Hussain nominated Dr Phillip Rice for the position of vice-chair. The nomination was seconded by Councillor Andrew Wood.

No further nominations were made.

The Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee **RESOVLED** to:

1. Elect Dr Phillip Rice as the Vice-Chair of the Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee for 2020-21.

4. CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE TERMS OF REFERENCE, QUORUM, MEMBERSHIP AND DATES OF MEETINGS 2020/21

The Chair, Councillor Bex White asked members to note the Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee's terms of reference, membership, quorum and dates of meeting for the municipal year 2020/21.

She informed members these had been agreed at Full Council on the 30th September 2020.

The Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee **RESOLVED** to:

1. Note its Terms of Reference, Quorum, Membership and Dates of future meetings as set out in Appendices 1, 2 and 3 to this report; and
2. **AGREED** to hold future meetings of the Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee at 5:30 p.m. if held virtually and at 6:30 p.m. if meetings are held in person at the Town Hall.

5. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes from the previous meeting of 11th August 2020 were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting.

6. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

6.1 Educational Impact of Covid-19

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 Councillor Danny Hassell, Cabinet Member for Children and Schools, who praised the leadership of Headteachers and education professionals who had in difficult circumstances, with varied government messages, worked tremendously hard to open schools in September 2020. He said this was a key moment for the borough with a range of partners helping to ensure schools could return safely.

Councillor Hassell said everyone was aware of the importance of safeguarding as well as health and wellbeing of children; and the role schools played in narrowing the inequalities gap. He said the Tower Hamlets Education Partnership (THEP) had supported and shared good practice, which had been invaluable in ensuring schools and pupils were well equipped with digital solutions, to narrow the gap between disadvantage groups.

The Sub-Committee heard from Tracy Smith, Executive Director, Tower Hamlets Education Partnership and Headteachers Brenda Landers of Swanlea Secondary School and Maria Lewington of John Scurr Primary School, on their experience of dealing with the impact Covid-19 was having on schools.

In response to questions from Members the following was noted:

- Ms Maria Lewington said not all children have access to technology at home. The Covid-19 pandemic had highlighted the quality of the technology being used and access to it. For instance, children may have access to a family iPad, laptop or computer however this was not necessarily of high quality and caused challenges such as siblings competing to have access to it. Ms Landers added that whilst remote learning meant children could view a video, it was not the same as children taking part in a lesson at school.
- In response to how much of a gap is there in terms of learning, that has been lost because of school closures due to the pandemic and how long will it take for children to catch up, Ms Landers said with the exception of year 10 and year 12 students, students in the other year groups had time to catch up with their learning, with staff at the school working, with families to put together interventions. The overwhelming majority of students would make up the deficits in their learning.

However, students in year 10 and 12 had missed a significant amount of time on their study courses and it was uncertain if the government would be providing any additional support, for these students when they took their exams. Ms Lewington added the gaps they had experienced were in the transition of children from home to primary school and the transition from primary to secondary school.

- Ms Landers stated the lockdown had demonstrated how resilient children are in adapting to new situations. She said some students had coped better than others with the lockdown and home learning, however young people with challenging home lives had suffered. She said many students were enthusiastic and focused in returning to school in September with a more appreciative attitude to their learning and education.
- Ms Lewington said it was difficult to pinpoint a particular demographic who had been particularly impacted but one of the risk factors were hard to reach families. She said the school tried to work with parents to ensure children are in school and overall, the school community was eager for the school to be open and for learning to take place. She said informing parents and explaining why children must not be in school, if they have symptoms of Covid-19, which has led to year groups having to isolate, had been challenging because parents want their children to be in school.
- Ms Smith said the Education Partnership had conducted a survey to find out about remote learning gaps, with 30% of schools responding. She said whilst this was not a wide coverage of schools it did provide a snapshot of what the concerns were. She said there wasn't a huge concern about gaps in learning but an emphasis on getting children back to school to allow learning to take place. Ms Smith said primary schools were particularly concerned about year 1 children as some of the children had forgotten behaviours for leaning and routines. Writing was one of the areas of concern. She said to support this, the Education Partnership had put together learning packs for children to do at home.
- Ms Smith continued stating boys and children with SEND were also mentioned in the survey. She said one of the benefits of having SEND and key worker children in school throughout the lockdown, had meant some children had benefited because of the extra time they had with their class teacher.
- Regarding remote learning, a project had been set up to peer review schools and to share learning, which would be taken forward in the new year. An Academy school had undertaken some work regarding access to devices and the Education Partnership had been working with a company to procure devices from large companies in the City and Canary Wharf. It has so far delivered 120 devices to local schools.
- In response to how teaching staff and support workers in school remain safe and how staff absences are being mitigated against, Ms Landers said that in preparation for the opening of the school in September, years 10 and 12 students had returned to school over the summer with the remaining years continuing to do remote learning. She said this

provided the opportunity for staff to learn the new safety procedures that had been put in place. Staff that were clinically vulnerable and staff who had high levels of anxiety but did not fall into the vulnerable category were identified and work was undertaken to ensure individual staff members were supported on a one to one basis.

- In response to if schools should close again, due to the rise in Covid-19 cases, Ms Landers said she did not believe schools should close. She said they should remain open so long as it was safe to do so. She said schools were an essential service and there shouldn't be a rush to close them.
- Ms Landers said the pandemic had been a new experience for most headteachers and coping with the rapid changes the school had to make especially over the last term had been phenomenal. She praised colleagues in Tower Hamlets Education Partnership (THEP), Public Health colleagues and the leadership of Christine McInnes, Divisional Director, Education and Partnerships for the support they had provided.
- Ms Landers said the consolidation of the SEND service by the local authority was a positive step which should help build capacity within schools. Ms Landers said the vast majority of SEND support was provided in schools and as such it was vital the financial support to schools was flexible enough to allow schools to make the right decision in terms of where provision was procured, to enable them tailor packages of support according to a child's needs.
- Ms Landers stated Covid-19 had made schools rethink how schools are run and organised and said this would not have happened had it not been for the pandemic. She said this had led to changes in routine and behaviour, to which most young people had responded positively. She said there would be a lot of changes which they would keep post Covid-19. Ms Landers said many Headteachers would say behaviour had improved for the better. She said considerable time was spent communicating to students the new routines and behaviours and the changes that had been made. Ms Lewington added that they had redesigned year groups which supported children in the classroom. However, this had been a challenge. She said they had to carefully think about the changes that they were making, and risk assess them, but overall behaviour had been even better than expected, especially in primary schools.
- In response to if schools and headteachers believed they had been supported by the Council and public health colleagues; Ms Smith responded stating in terms of support provided to schools it was a level playing field. She said her organisation THEP had been quick to provide support to every Headteacher and offered leadership and coaching programmes to approximately 75 out of 100 schools. Ms Smith said they had increased the offer of leadership and consultants to schools and had put on virtual coffee meetings and meetings concerning practical steps such as how teachers could use Google classrooms for virtual learning. She said it was important for teaching professionals not to feel isolated and praised the leadership in schools in Tower Hamlets. She said some schools required more support, depending on the number of Covid cases, but this was reviewed on a

weekly basis. Headteachers worked collaboratively and there was always someone who could share their learning and give advice.

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.

6.2 Food provision for vulnerable families

Councillor Danny Hassell, Cabinet Member for Children and Schools introduced this item stating the pandemic had intensified the challenge to ensure children do not go hungry, especially when out of school. He said vital food support had been made critical during the pandemic and work was ongoing with the voluntary sector and other providers to ensure networks, such as schools could play a key role in tackling food hunger.

He said at the early stages of the pandemic there had been different systems of free school meals support, with various government schemes, each differing in their complexities. However, the government had now issued a block grant to support vulnerable families during term time as well as during school holidays, allowing Councils to provide targeted support to vulnerable families.

The Sub-Committee heard from Ms Ellie Kershaw, Tackling Poverty Programme Manager, Ms Elizabeth Marshall, Bow Food Bank and Mr Paul Jackson, Headteacher of Manorfield Primary School.

Ms Ellie Kershaw gave a presentation providing statistical information on the number of people claiming benefits and the impact Covid-19 was having on vulnerable families and individuals. She said the number of households that are claiming Universal Credit in Tower Hamlets had risen quite significantly, with a substantial number of younger people moving onto Universal Credit. She said this had nearly doubled since February 2020. Likewise, there had been a rise in the number of households claiming council tax reduction and housing benefit. Ms Kershaw said claims for housing benefit had increased by 2000 cases, although she expected this to be far worse, because the figure did not include universal credit claimants. She said the DWP did not share data on Universal Credit however there was a cross-borough, London group of authorities who were asking the DWP to share the data, in order to gain a better picture of what was going on.

Ms Kershaw provided members with an update on what the local authority was doing to tackle food inequality and said schemes had been introduced to provide families with support. For example, over Christmas every child eligible claiming a free school meal would receive a £25.00 voucher to use in a local supermarket. She said schools had also been asked to identify those not eligible for a free school meal but who they were concerned about. Ms

Kershaw said the vouchers would be provided to 18,600 children and said this was being funded by the DWP winter Covid grant.

Members heard from Ms Marshall of Bow Food Bank who said the Bow Food Bank was an independent charity which had been set up about six and a half years ago. It initially operated out of Bow Church but had witnessed an increase in the number of people using the food bank with an excess of a 100 people a week - many families with children. She said this resulted in the charity setting up another food bank in Bethnal Green however, the number of people visiting kept growing from 100 a week to 200, to 400 a week. This resulted in the charity moving to a larger premise and they are now situated in the Bromley-by-Bow centre. She said when the pandemic hit, the numbers increased to approximately 1000 adults and over 1000 children a week. Ms Marshall said the most recent figures showed 300 families, 423 adults and 830 children every week. She said many of the people were in desperate need. The centre opened at 7:00 a.m. and there would be a line of people waiting in the cold and rain, for a bag of food.

Ms Marshall said the charity had stuck to its principles in that it did not require a referral or evidence of status to help anyone. She said the charity had benefited from the council's hub provision and the DEFRA grant. Ms Marshall explained they were worried about if they had enough money to afford the food they needed and ultimately had cut the number of items available plus have had to register people so to limit the number of visits. They were campaigning to gain political interest, which had been supported by the Mayor and MP Rushanara Ali. Ms Marshall said Ms Ali had appeared on the BBC Sunday Politics show and a short film was shown about the work undertaken by the charity. She said they heard some heart-rending stories daily, of people struggling with food poverty. She said the charity aimed to set up a Community Pantry, which the Council was supporting and hoped to have a more sustainable and cooperative provision in the long-term. Ms Marshall said sadly food banks were here to stay and required major funding going forward.

Lastly, the Sub-Committee heard from Mr Paul Jackson, Headteacher of Manorfield Primary School. Mr Jackson said the school was situated near the Teviot Estate in Poplar. He said when he took over the school about five years ago, he was struck by level of poverty that existed and the lack of hope and positivity within the community. He said he was determined to change this by helping families who faced challenging circumstances. The school's intent was to support the children and to overcome barriers no matter what the difficulties were.

Mr Jackson said when the first lockdown happened in March 2020, the school knew it had to support families with access to food. He said it was crucial the school did not lose contact with families and vulnerable children. There were low levels of key workers and a high number of unemployed in the

community, so the school knew it had to engage with families even before the government had made clear their approach to food vouchers. He said there was the possibility the school would need to fund this through their own school budget.

Mr Jackson stated that at the initial stages of the pandemic, the school felt it could provide better value for money by providing actual food rather than a voucher, so this is what it set out to do. This was at the time when there were long queues and empty shelves in supermarkets. He said there was also concern about the potential misuse of vouchers, being used for inappropriate items. Mr Jackson informed members that during the first week of the lockdown, the school had provided 100 to 200 food parcels. This was mainly though food donated to the school and food bought by the school rather than money spent on food vouchers. This occurred for the first few weeks until it became clear the government would be funding vouchers, through central funds.

Mr Jackson said they continued to support families through their food distribution programme, in addition to the government vouchers, by identifying families who were in need of support but had not registered for free school meals, and low income families were not entitled to benefits but were still experiencing food poverty. He said many families fell into this category and therefore the school decided to continue with its programme. The school in partnership with the hospitality industry worked to provide food to vulnerable families. For example, Hovis who are based in Forest Gate, provided a lot of bread which was distributed with the food packages. Mr Jackson said at one point the food programme was feeding over 400 to 500 families per week.

Mr Jackson said he assisted other schools to replicate their model of food distribution however at this point of the lockdown, the snag was wholesalers had shut-down and new accounts could not be set up with them. Therefore, the Manorfield School and charity become a hub whereby it made purchases on behalf of other schools and received food donations which it distributed to approximately 20 schools. At its peak, they were distributing around 1000 food parcels a week, over a four to five-week period which continued until September 2020 when schools were looking to reopen. Over the summer holidays, food distribution involved a mix and match approach. Manorfield school accessed the Council's hunger fund and supported families at Manorfield and Gorsefield Residential Centre by providing activities and food at summer camps.

Mr Jackson continued stating that in September the priority changed to bringing children back to school. He said the logistics involved in distributing food and identifying families had been a challenge, but it brought home to roost the number of families which require help. He said he concurred with Ms Marshall's assessment that families were in desperate need of food welfare. He said families came to the school because they had a social connection with the school and whilst it could be argued that some had used the service because it was free, his view was that if it helped find one family in genuine

need then it was worth the effort. Mr Jackson said the food distribution programme had been scaled down since September however the school would continue to accept food donations and have an ad hoc offer in place for families.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- The Chair praised the efforts of Mr Jackson and Ms Marshall and said there was a social stigma attached to accessing food banks and asking for help, when it was needed. She said she took to heart the comments made that it was better to have a general offer of assistance accessible to everyone rather than those that targeted vulnerable families experiencing food hunger.
- In response to the distribution of food vouchers to schools, with a week to go to the Christmas holidays, Ms Kershaw said the late government announcement on the Winter Covid Fund, meant a mayoral decision was required in order to get the initiative going because of the amount of money involved. She said once the decision had been made, the vouchers had to be ordered. She said the vouchers had arrived and three members of her team were racing to get these out to schools today.
- Regarding the supermarkets in which they can be used, Ms Kershaw said Tesco and Asda were the two supermarkets which had agreed to work with the Council. No response had been received from Sainsbury and Iceland did not offer vouchers at all. She said a discussion was required on food vouchers and if they were the best way forward or if food should be provided directly, in the February half-term.
- Councillor Salva-Macallan commented that timely communication was needed about food vouchers, as parents and schools needed to know what was available.
- In response to what capacity is there to think about food in the borough differently and use existing sites for distribution, such as sites previously used by the meal of wheels service, Ms Kershaw responded saying her team had been reactive to every pot of money available, since the pandemic hit. A member of staff left the team but she was hoping to recruit a food poverty officer as this was what was needed.
- Mr Jackson added that schools were often seen as a safe place by families and it was easier for them to come to the school and collect food, rather than go to a food bank, which had stigma attached to it. Mr Jackson said the pandemic had provided an opportunity to think creatively about how food is prepared and distributed. He said school kitchens and chefs from the hospitality industry wanted to collaborate, but this required leadership and innovation.

The Chair thanked all the participants for this item and summarised the discussion as follows:

1. The need to provide broader services to combat stigma.
2. Timely communications so that messages can reach people as soon as possible
3. To think differently about how funding can be used for next summer to ensure provision is more sustainable.

6.3 Tower Hamlets Safeguarding Partnership

Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture made a presentation to the Sub-Committee outlining the work of the Tower Hamlets Safeguarding Partnership. He was joined by Mr Az Odabashian, Acting Detective Chief Inspector Public Protection (Met Police) and Mr Chetan Vyas, Director of Quality and Safety (WEL CCG).

He informed Members there had been a smooth transition from the former Board to the Partnership and highlighted three areas which gave new responsibilities to the statutory safeguarding partners.

Mr Thomas said under the new requirements equal responsibility in safeguarding children in the borough had been given to *all* partners rather than just the local authority. The changes also required independent scrutiny of the Partnership. Mr Thomas said the government had not prescribed how this would happen and had left it open to local partners to decide. The Partnership decided to appoint an independent scrutineer to oversee their work but were clear they could not rely on one person. He said the Partnership would develop a range of methods for independent scrutiny, with the Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee also having a role in that process. Thirdly, changes had been made to how reviews are undertaken, with a move away from serious case reviews to the new local learning reviews. This gave local partners more leeway to establish the scope and determine how they carry out the reviews.

Ms Thomas said that since establishing the baseline for the changes, they had started to bring in more rigour to the partnership in terms of fulfilling their responsibilities, understanding the safeguarding system, looking at what is working well and what needs attention to drive improvement. Mr Thomas said they relied on data, listening to what children and young people told them plus a range of activity including learning reviews and audits. Mr Thomas informed members considerable time had been spent in setting the core priorities of the Partnership for 2021/22 and three key areas had been identified. (1) Domestic Abuse and the Impact on Children and Young People (2) Staying Safe Online and (3) Exploitation and Adolescent Safeguarding (Joint with Safeguarding Adults Board).

In response to questions from Members the following was noted:

- The framework for serious case reviews were set nationally, however under the new local learning reviews, the Partnership has more discretion as to how these are carried out. Mr Thomas said there would be both national and local learning reviews so wherever there is a death and reason to think that it could have been prevented, the Partnership had a responsibility to carry out a rapid review within 15 days, to determine whether a full local review should be carried out. Mr Thomas said the guidance is on learning and not on blame. The national panel takes a thematic approach so instead of looking in detail at one incident they gather a cluster of incidents and do a comprehensive piece of work nationally. Mr Thomas said they were looking at how they could replicate this locally because by looking at a cluster of cases with similar issues arising the Partnership would gain a depth of learning which it would not get from just looking at one incident.
- The technology devices supplied to children, during the pandemic for home learning had safeguarding software installed and schools would ensure checks and balances were in place, so they are not used inappropriately.
- In response to how cases of harm were investigated, Mr Vyas responded stating in all incidents there is a rapid review process. The process is undertaken with a range of partners and professionals in the safeguarding environment who make a judgement call based on all the information they have available. Mr Vyas said based on evidence a recommendation is made to the Children's safeguarding executive to instigate a learning review. Mr Vyas said he was not suggesting cases would not be investigated because all cases are subject to a rapid review but there is a judgment call as to whether this would proceed to a full learning review. In respect to the Bethnal Green case, Mr Vyas said it was difficult to comment on specifics but professionals who would have come into contact with the girls, would have had to make a judgement call regarding the case.
- The Chair stated it would be beneficial to learn if that case would be something we could learn from now. She acknowledged the case predated the time the invitees had been at Tower Hamlets.
- In reference to page 89 of the agenda which showed the proportion of children subject to a child protection plan by category of abuse, Councillor Perry asked why Tower Hamlets had a high percentage of cases of Neglect, at 65%. She asked what were the instances of neglect and the reasons for this? Mr Baldwin, Divisional Director for Children's Social Care stated neglect cases were taken seriously and said this was a key issue for the borough. He said the figures were what they were but in terms of looked after children the numbers were low compared to statistical neighbours and the national average. Mr Baldwin said the Council's social care team did a good job keeping

children safe at home and said this was reflected in their understanding of neglect. Poverty and inadequate housing played a role in why a child may be subject to a plan under the category of Neglect. Mr Baldwin said these were not a reason to bring children into care on their own but may indicate a safeguarding issue particularly when there are parents who might have a substance misuse or mental health issue and/or children at risk of exploitation.

- The Chair asked how the Partnership was going to achieve a balance between being reactive and being strategic. Mr Thomas responded saying the Partnership had concerns about harm being hidden during the pandemic lockdown and as such the Partnership were conscious that it ought not be stuck in a reactive space. Mr Thomas said they had set their strategic priorities for the year ahead and believed a balance would be maintained between the two. Mr Thomas said there would always be an element of being reactive, however he hoped that through the priorities and the annual report which would be brought to the Sub-Committee, they would be able to show the rigour in how they have raised the bar in safeguarding.
- The Chair asked how the new partnership was going to ensure it was a healthy working partnership and not a partnership based on passing the buck. How would it be taking ownership for decisions to keep children safe? Mr Odabashian responded saying buck passing was not the way forward and whilst each service area, council, metropolitan police and health partners were stretched in terms of staffing and budget pressures, there were functions that each organisation had to undertake and each were a critical friend to each other. Mr Odabashian said conflict can raise but the intention is always do the right thing for the child. Mr Vyas added they had every intention of being strategic and would ensure the Partnership would be a healthy place to improve the lives of children they were protecting.
- **ACTION:** The Chair said she would be keen to meet with the independent scrutineer and asked if the independent scrutineer could comment on the questions asked by members and said she would like a further discussion on this at a future meeting looking at the strategic priorities.

The Chair thanked the participants for this item and said the Sub-Committee appreciated their attendance.

7. ANY OTHER UNRESTRICTED BUSINESS CONSIDERED TO BE URGENT

Councillor Salava-Macallan asked if the Schools Forum meeting dates could be added to the Corporate calendar, with access to minutes and agenda as is standard practice in other Councils. She said it was important to ensure public had access to these meetings.

- **ACTION:** Mr Jonathan Solomons to look at this and get the meeting dates added to the corporate calendar.

On behalf of the Sub-Committee, the Chair expressed thanks to all council employees for their hard work over the pandemic in what had been a very tough year.

The meeting ended at 7.40 p.m.

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