

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

HELD AT 4.30 P.M. ON MONDAY, 21 JUNE 2021

**COMMITTEE ROOM ONE - TOWN HALL, MULBERRY PLACE, 5 CLOVE
CRESCENT, LONDON, E14 2BG**

Members Present:

Councillor Bex White (Chair)
Councillor Andrew Wood
Councillor Shad Chowdhury*
Councillor Victoria Obaze*
Councillor Gabriela Salva-Macallan*
Councillor Abdal Ullah*

Co-opted Members Present:

Neil Cunningham* – Parent Governor
Ahmed Hussain* – Parent Governor
Dr Phillip Rice – Church of England Representative

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Asma Begum* Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for
Children, Youth Services and Education

Apologies:

Councillor Helal Uddin Joanna Hannan

Officers Present:

Richard Baldwin* – (Divisional Director, Supporting Families)
Alice Bigelow* – (Parks Manager, Parks & Open Spaces)
Jack Duncton* – (Serious and Organised Crime Manager)
DI Chris Heathcote* – (Metropolitan Police)
Dave Hime* – (Manager -Victoria Park)
Steve Nyakatawa* – (Director of Education)
Rachel Ringham* – (Head of Service, Exploitation)
Layla Richards* – (Head of Strategy and Policy – Children and Culture)
Paul Sammut* – (Parks Development Officer)
Jonathan Solomons – (Strategy and Policy Manager - Children and Culture)
James Thomas* – (Corporate Director, Children and Culture)
Sean Thomas- Stewart* – (Park Ranger, Victoria Park)
Farhana Zia – (Democratic Services Officer,

Committees, Governance)

*attended virtually - online

MINUTE SILENCE

A minute's silence was observed in memory of Cllr John Pierce and Ronke Martins-Taylor.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillor Helal Uddin and Ms Joanna Hannan, representative of the Diocese of Westminster gave apologies for absence.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

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

3. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

The Chair, Councillor Bex White 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 2021-22.

4. CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE TERMS OF REFERENCE, QUORUM, MEMBERSHIP AND DATES OF MEETINGS 2021/22

Ms Farhana Zia, Democratic Services Officer 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 2021/22.

She informed members these had been agreed at Full Council on the 19th May 2021.

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 6:30 p.m. for physical meetings and 5:30 p.m. for virtual meetings.

5. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes from the previous meeting of 14th April 2021 were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting and were signed off by the Sub-Committee.

6. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

6.1 Covid 19 Update- Parks and Open Spaces

The Sub-Committee received a verbal update on the impact of Covid-19 on Parks and Open Spaces.

Councillor Asma Begum, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Children, Youth Services and Education introduced the item before handing over to Ms Alice Bigelow, Head of Parks.

The Sub-Committee heard from Ms Alice Bigelow, Head of Parks, Mr Dave Hime, Manager of Victoria Park, Mr Sean Thomas-Stewart, Park Ranger at Victoria Park and Mr Paul Sammut, Parks Development Officer.

The main points made by Ms Bigelow were:

- The Parks Service had experienced an incredibly intense period over the past 18 months. Normal activity ceased abruptly at the beginning of the pandemic, with the need to patrol and monitor parks increasing exponentially, with more people using open spaces during the lockdowns.
- Ms Bigelow said the way in which the service operates had changed completely, with less focus on activities and interaction with the community and more focus on keeping the 120 parks in Tower Hamlets open and safe for the local community and visitors.
- She said the teams based in Victoria Park and Mile End Park had worked extremely hard to ensure the parks remained open during the height of the pandemic.
- One of the biggest challenges faced was in relation to staffing, with some staff members having to shield, during the pandemic. To cope with the shortfall in staff, re-deployed staff and volunteers were used to manage the parks effectively.
- Spring/Summer 2020 saw the biggest number of volunteers which was an enormous benefit although in some cases it was a challenge to integrate them within the team. Experienced staff were required to patrol with the volunteers, especially those that were interested in patrolling their neighbourhoods.
- One of the positives from the volunteering has been the number of people who are still volunteering with the Parks Team.

The main points made by Mr Hime were:

- Victoria Park initially closed for a period of 17 days at the time of the first lockdown. This generated an unprecedented amount of

complaints, with many people unhappy that the decision was taken to close the park. A similar number of complaints were received when the Park was re-opened, with people questioning why it was opened. Due to the volume of complaints received it was necessary to refer them to the complaints team to handle.

- Ms Bigelow added that following government guidance, outdoor gyms and playgrounds were closed off. However, some members of the public were deliberately tampering with the barricades using bolt cutters and angle grinders. She said this resulted in further complaints which the Parks Team had to contend with.
- Mr Hime said in his forty-three-year career, 2020 could be classified as the most stressful year. He said Park Rangers do not have enforcement powers and whilst they respectfully asked people to move on or told them they could not sit on park benches or have picnics in large groups this caused arguments and flashpoints including assaults and violence.
- He said Victoria Park was 40% busier than in previous years and all the staff from management, to gardeners and park rangers had stepped up to ensure the park was open and welcoming for visitors.
- Mr Hime added litter and access to public toilets were also challenges faced by his team. He said volunteers had greatly helped with the management of litter, with the timely disposal and emptying of bins as well as the public toilets.
- He said due to the Covid-19 restrictions, toilets in buildings were closed off and the ones which were available had to be supervised. Mr Hime said he had put in a bid for an upgrade of the toilets in Victoria Park and was hopeful this would help improve the current facilities available.

Mr Thomas-Stewart added:

- Volunteers and redeployees had made a difference to keeping the parks open however the amount of complaints and difficult interactions with visitors did impact of Park Rangers significantly.

The main points made by Mr Paul Sammut were:

- During the pandemic, part of Mr Sammut's role was to check on equipment in playgrounds and parks and ensure it was secure, especially when incidences of vandalism were occurring.
- The capital programme consists of several strands with a programme of improvement of playground equipment and the redevelopment of parks and open spaces. Weavers Fields has a new playground which is 100% inclusive. Mile End Park is being redeveloped with a bigger playground, which should be finished by November 2021.

- Further projects consist of improvements to Millwall Park and Mudchute Park and Farm as well as improved signage for King Edward Memorial Park.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- The vandalism was reported to the Police. The Parks team have worked with the Police, the Anti-Social Behaviour team and the THEO team to talk about the issues however it's not an easy task, catching someone in the act. The vandalism happened in the middle of the night and stopped when the government allowed for gym and playgrounds to reopen.
- In relation to toilets in parks, Ms Bigelow said these were a source of anti-social behaviour if not staffed by the Council. She said very few parks had toilets however as part of the capital programme, where there are changing room facilities, toilets were being upgraded so that people with disabilities were able to use the facility via a radar key. She said unless there was money to pay staff to supervise toilets, the capital programme could not fix this issue alone, which is London-wide issue.
- Mr Hime stated that during the first lockdown, none of the toilets were open as the park had limited opening times of 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. As the restrictions eased, toilets within Victoria Park were opened but not every cubicle, so to ensure the safety for everyone. He said twenty-one toilets were useable, but these were very few to cope with the demand. He said that part of the capital programme was to introduce self-contained toilets, which would be pandemic friendly.
- In response to what data is available regarding who uses the parks and how needs are identified, Ms Bigelow said they did not systematically collect such data. The data they did have was in relation to consultations carried out on park improvements and the profile of people who had responded. Ms Bigelow said more research was required as this would be a useful exercise for the Council to commission, but it was costly and time consuming.
- Dr Rice queried if there was a London-wide forum to make collective representations about parks in London. Ms Bigelow said there was a London-wide Park Mangers forum and other park associations where experiences can be shared.
- Mr Hime said electric scooters were new contraptions that had become popular during the pandemic and were causing issues within parks. He said there was no bye law regarding the speed at which they are ridden. He said the borough was also taking part in a government run pilot for e-scooters. He said with no enforcement powers Park Rangers can only ask people to slow down. He said this was also an issue with speeding cyclists too.
- **ACTION:** Mr Hime to investigate how the bye laws can be strengthened to include the use of e-scooters and drones in parks.

- In response to if Poplar HARCA had taken an active role in the upkeep of Bartlet Park, Ms Bigelow said that whilst this was the hope under the S106 agreement, Poplar HARCA would need some pushing to share the cost of the upkeep of the park.

The Chair thanked the attendees for their contribution to the meeting and said their input had been invaluable, in helping the members understand the work of the Parks team and the challenges faced during the pandemic.

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

1. Systematic data collection on who is using parks would be useful, especially relating to young people, age groups and how they can be made welcoming for those who do not currently use them.
2. To understand how far people are travelling to use Tower Hamlets parks.
3. To look at the use of e-scooters in parks by making it more explicit in the bye laws on how they are used, perhaps with improved signage in parks.
4. Prioritising toilets of children, especially those with disabilities.
5. To ensure commitments made by a third-party as part of their planning application are followed through and any undertaken given is adhered to.
6. The provision of water fountains across as many parks as possible.

6.2 Education Priorities

Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director of Children and Culture introduced this item stating that Mr Steve Nyakatawa had been appointed as the Divisional Director for Education and was approximately four weeks into the job. He asked Mr Nyakatawa to give a brief history of his background and first impressions at Tower Hamlets.

Mr Nyakatawa stated his experience before outlining the challenges which would require his focus. He said improving the outcomes for young people and working with SEND families would be key to ensure improvements. He said they were working to improve attainment for the post 16 cohort, to enable them to get into further education and would be reviewing the Careers Advice service. Mr Nyakatawa said they were waiting government guidance on the post COVID recovery plan for children who had missed out on their schooling.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- Local organisations such as Tower Hamlets Education Partnership (THEP) were involved in the post-Covid recovery plan and as such Mr Nyakatawa was optimistic, they would reach out to young people and their families, with strategies to improve outcomes of young people.
- In response to what steps had been taken to achieve post-Covid recovery, Mr Nyakatawa said it was important to focus on the

'emotional wellbeing' of the young person and to ensure they are fully supported. He said they were working with THEP and schools to identify the gaps, with schools working together to address areas such as reading and writing.

The Chair thanked Mr Thomas and Mr Nyakatawa for their contribution and the update on the educational recovery post-Covid.

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

1. Receive a report at the next meeting on the outcome of the SEND inspection.

6.3 Violence, Vulnerability and Exploitation

Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture said one of the most challenging aspects of work undertaken by the Safeguarding Partnership was the safeguarding of adolescents from violence, vulnerability and exploitation. He said often adolescents were resistant to help that is offered, with a particular kind of dynamic relating to criminal drug dealing, which means young people are drawn into situations of exploitation via criminal or sexual exploitation and can find it very difficult to extricate themselves, even with professional support.

Mr Thomas said that he was pleased Tower Hamlets had a partnership approach and that the VVE strategy had been launched to address the needs of young people.

Mr Richard Baldwin, Divisional Director for Supporting Families then gave a presentation on the VVE Strategy explaining the principles which underpin the strategy and the key themes.

Ms Rachel Ringham, Head of Service - Exploitation and DI Chris Heathcote from the Metropolitan Police added that partnership working was key to recognising and preventing exploitation. DI Heathcote said his teams worked closely with the Council to share intelligence and data.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- There are times when the families require re-housing quickly, due to the threat of violence. Children's Social Care has good relationships with the Council's housing department but there are times when processes, due to their complex nature, do not move a quickly enough. Often families are moved to Bed and Breakfast accommodation or to wider family members, before they are re-housed somewhere safe.
- The Council and the Metropolitan Police have good relationships with neighbouring boroughs and share data and intelligence. Where a young person has been moved outside of the borough the receiving local authority and Police Force are briefed and investigate the crime further.

- There is a named Officer in the Housing Department with whom the exploitation team liaise directly with.
- **ACTION:** The Sub-Committee to receive anonymised data/case studies on the types of cases being dealt with, so to help members gain a sense of the safeguarding issues involved.
- In response to how awareness is raised among young people to seek help, Ms Ringham explained this was a slow process whereby rapport is built and maintained through conversation so to gain the young person's trust. The young person is in regular contact with the social worker and police and are supported through education and recreational activities with the hope they will confide and talk about the exploitation taking place. Any data or intelligence is shared within the partnership. Awareness is also raised through schools, parent coffee mornings and in the community. It a covert crime and is hard to spot so takes time to solve.

The Chair thanked the attendees for their contribution to the meeting and said their input had been invaluable, in helping the members understand how effective partnerships can help with the work on violence, vulnerability and exploitation.

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

1. Good partnership working was key to ensure information, data and intelligence was being shared across agencies to address exploitation of young people.
2. Further enhancement was required with getting support for families, who were required to move at short notice, especially with the housing process.

7. ANY OTHER UNRESTRICTED BUSINESS CONSIDERED TO BE URGENT

No other business was discussed at the meeting.

The meeting ended at 6.26 p.m.

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