

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.32 P.M. ON THURSDAY, 2 SEPTEMBER 2021

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

Members Present:

Councillor Bex White (Chair)

Councillor Victoria Obaze
Councillor Gabriella Salva-Macallan*

Councillor Andrew Wood

Co-opted Members Present:

Dr Phillip Rice (Vice Chair)
Joanna Hannan*

- Church of England Representative
- Diocese of Westminster
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Apologies:

Councillor Shad Chowdhury

Councillor Helal Uddin

Others Present:

Dr Helen Jones*
Harry Forshaw*
Shaw Chifamba*
Taryak Hussain *
Amal Nur*

- Local GP and Director of Health Spot
- Spotlight
- Young Person
- Young Person
- Young Person
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Officers Present:

Anthony Harris*
Jonathan Solomons

- Commissioning Manager
- (Strategy and Policy Manager - Children and Culture)
- (Corporate Director, Children and Culture)
- Independent Scrutineer
- (Democratic Services Officer, Committees, Governance)

James Thomas*

Keith Makin*
Farhana Zia

*attended virtually – online

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Helal Uddin and Councillor Shad Chowdhury.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

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

However, for the record, the Chair Councillor Bex White declared that she knew Dr Helen Jones who was speaking in relation to item 4.1.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting of 21st June 2021 were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting save to note that Councillor Abdal Ullah was not in attendance for the meeting. The Sub-Committee signed off the minutes.

4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

4.1 Covid 19 Update - Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing

The Sub-Committee received a verbal update on the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of young people.

Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture introduced the item saying mental health and emotional wellbeing was one of the three key priorities of the Tower Hamlets Safeguarding Children Partnership. He said there had been an increase in the number of young people and families experiencing mental health issues since the pandemic, with increased levels of isolation, anxiety and worry about prospects amongst young people as well as increased cases of domestic violence and breakdown of family relationships.

The Sub-Committee heard from Mr Harry Forshaw, a youth worker from Spotlight, who explained what his organisation had done to support young people during the pandemic before hearing from young people who had attended the meeting.

Mr Shaw Chifamba a second-year university student stated he had been involved with the work of Spotlight for approximately two years and had held several mental health positions both in University as well as in sixth form college.

The main points made by Mr Chifamba were:

- Students had expressed feelings of isolation, depression and sadness following the first wave of the lockdown and pandemic, with many students finding it difficult to cope with family dynamics and poor living conditions.
- The dream of experiencing university life and face to face learning had been quashed due to the pandemic with many students suffering from insomnia. He said that he had been able to access data from university servers which indicated that the average time that students were online was getting later and later and that lack of sleep was becoming more of an issue.

- Mr Chifamba recommended the Sub-Committee to look at what online resources were available to support young people and said it was not always ideal for a young person to see a doctor, wait for a referral and engage with professional mental health providers, in the traditional way.
- Quick and simple access was required so young people could, for example join an online forum and talk to a professional straight away; to providing information which young people can read and be more aware of their mental health.

Mr Taryak Hussain addressed the Sub-Committee stating that he was a volunteer with Spotlight. He said Spotlight had supported him as a young person and therefore he wanted to give back to the community. Mr Hussain said his own mental health had suffered during the pandemic, with him receiving mental health treatment due to complications in his life.

The main points made by Mr Hussain were:

- Young people with mental health issues suffered from low self-esteem and lacked the ambition to succeed. Feelings of isolation, low-mood and depression were common among young people.
- The pandemic and lockdown had resulted in young people being unable to socialise with friends and feed off each other to maintain a positive mindset.
- Despite the lifting of restrictions, staying home had become the norm. This unhealthy cycle needed to be broken. Young people required support and guidance on how to start up conversations and make friends, as well as assistance to access professional help when they required it.
- Mr Hussain recommended the Sub-Committee to speak to young people directly to understand the issues that were of concern to them.

Ms Amal Nur, a first-year nursing student said she had been involved with the youth community for three to four years and said mental health had changed significantly over the last decade.

The main points made by Ms Nur were:

- Young people did not always have the knowledge or skills to recognise stress and mental health issues and how to deal with this.
- Access to mental health provision was not provided in a format which young people found accessible.
- Young people avoided talking to other young people and/or adults/professionals due to the perceived stigma of having a mental health issue. She said this was particularly an issue in BAME communities. They focussed on their education or spent time on social

media to distract themselves from dealing with their mental health issue until it became a crisis.

- Ms Nur recommended the Sub-Committee promote mental health education in schools and provide a safe place for young people to express their issues without being judged by others.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- Going back to school/college or university will help give young people a sense of normality however the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic will take longer to deal with. Young people must contend with feelings of depression, low-mood and isolation and require support and guidance to navigate the return to normality.
- In response to how awareness could be raised in BAME communities where children are classed as naughty or stubborn because of their mental health condition, Mr Chifamba said this would be a challenge due to the cultural differences but if professionals were serious about the tackling this then they needed to work with parents to ensure they understood the cultural nuances as well as educate parents.
- Data to support the rise in insomnia was from the university servers, which indicated students were online until 2:00 a.m. with a gradual increase to 5:00 a.m. during the lockdown.
- The transition from sixth form college to university had been difficult for those students who finished their education in 2020. The pandemic meant the last few months of their study and exams were interrupted, with a considerable amount of uncertainty as to what would happen with exam results. Coupled with the lack of support and preparedness for university, with many students having nothing to do over a six-month period, the start of university had been a stressful time. Some young people had shown resilience whilst others had by January 2021 dropped out of university.
- In response to if young people were aware of the mental health services available, Mr Hussain stated that it was not always obvious to young people how to access services. He said during his own crisis he was confused whether to approach adult mental health services or CAMHS as he was in the 18-21 age bracket.
- Ms Nur and Mr Chifamba added it was hard for young people to admit to a mental health issue. They found it difficult to identify what exactly was wrong and find the right information online to identify and seek access to the right service. They said services were difficult to navigate not just for young people but other professionals such as teachers.
- **ACTION:** Mr Anthony Harris from the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) offered to meet with the young people to discuss ways to improve access to Adult and CAMHS services.
- In response to what social media platforms information should be on, Mr Chifamba said whilst having general campaigns on social media, such as YouTube, Snapchat, Facebook were a method of

disseminating information, the local health partnership needed to develop a local app/ website which signposted young people to the right service, which they should promote widely in schools, youth services and universities.

Following the young people, a presentation was made by Dr Helen Jones, a local GP who works with Spotlight. She said Health Spot was a service launched in April 2019, which was specifically dedicated to the well-being of young people. She said it provided a safe space for young people to discuss and access medical advice and services.

The main points made by Dr Jones were:

- Health Spot was an extended GP Clinic based at the Spotlight Youth Centre which operated in the evenings and provided support to young people, in a safe friendly environment.
- Many of the issue highlighted by the young people resonated with Dr Jones, who said young people found it difficult to navigate basic services, with a tendency to fall between the gaps. They had worries about confidentiality and fears parents will find out.
- The aim of Health Spot was to remove the barriers, with youth workers bridging the gap between finding out the issues and Health Spot providing health support to young people such as mental health counsellors, access to sexual health services and/or substance misuse services.
- The pandemic lockdown had led to an increase in the number of young people experiencing mental health issues.
- A key challenge was to remove barriers for under 18s, such as access to GP, without the consent of parents.
- Dr Jones said there was a lack of awareness both locally and nationally and whilst some effort had been made to integrate services more needed to be done.
- Stigma and struggling to understand what children were facing, was also an issue with many parents needing support on how to recognise and help their child.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- The funding for the Health Spot project was from various funding pots and was open to all young people in Tower Hamlets.
- Spotlight is a youth service open to all young people 11-19 years olds and young adults with special education needs or disabilities. Health Spot was a first, to be done in a youth centre with the hope to replicate the model elsewhere.
- Data showed young people from the east side of the borough were using the service more as well as young people for other London boroughs.

The Chair thanked the attendees for their contribution to the meeting and said their input had been invaluable, in helping members to understand the impact Covid-19 had had on the mental health of young people.

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

1. Mr Anthony Harris (CCG) to speak with young people to ensure the voice of young people is heard in the shaping and commissioning of services. In particular, the transition between CAMHS and Adult services. The Sub-Committee to be kept informed on the progress made.
2. Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture to investigate what provision is available in schools to support young people returning to school.
3. What schools are doing to raise parental awareness of mental health. Are School open days, transition from primary to secondary schools used as ways to engage with parents.
4. What online resources are available and consider developing a text-based service for young people.
5. How are young people consulted about their mental health, not just CAMHS but more broadly?
6. What measures are in place particularly for Year 13 students, whose education has been interrupted by the pandemic and have not sat exams. How are they being supported?

4.2 SEND Inspection - outcome and next steps

Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture stated that Ofsted and the CQC had undertaken the local area inspection at the beginning of July 2021. It was envisaged the outcome would be reported to the Sub-Committee at this meeting however the letter from Ofsted had not yet been published.

Mr Thomas said the inspection outcome would be addressed to both the council and the CCG and said the timeframe for the inspection had been delayed due to the pandemic. He said the inspectors had carried out a full inspection including interviewing young people and observing sessions from early years to further education settings.

Mr Thomas referred to the self-evaluation and said a number of improvements had already been put in place to address the weaknesses identified. Mr Thomas said it was best for the report and outcomes to be presented to the sub-committee, once in receipt of the letter from Ofsted.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- Referring to page 40 of the agenda pack, and the statistical information provided for the number of Education, Health & Care plans completed

within the statutory timescales, Councillor Wood enquired if the numbers were correct and if so, why there was such a disparity for Tower Hamlets compared with London and England. Mr Thomas confirmed the figures were accurate and said their performance for this had been completely unacceptable. He said there were several reasons for this. The team was under-resourced and were dealing with year on year increases in EHC plans. Sickness absence had also contributed to the backlog. However, a recovery plan had been implemented and resources for the team had been increased. He said the progress is tracked monthly and the latest figures show 41% are being completed within the timescales. Mr Thomas acknowledged there was still a way to go to see further improvement.

- In response to the High-End Needs recovery plan, Mr Thomas said this was being refreshed in consultation with the DfE. He said the overspend for the High-End Needs block was a national issue and many local authorities were under funded. He said they had an accumulated deficit of £12m which is average for the size of the local authority.
- **ACTION:** The Ofsted letter to be circulated to the Members of the Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee, on its publication so members can comment and raise questions in writing.

The Chair thanked Mr Thomas for the update.

4.3 Children's Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report

Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture introduced the Children's Safeguarding Partnership's Annual Report. He said Mr Keith Makin, the Independent Scrutineer would be presenting his views in relation to the progress made, however wanted to state that the statutory changes made in 2019 to the partnership shifted the onus of the partnership on all three stakeholders and strengthened the partnership with the appointment of an independent scrutineer.

Mr Thomas said the partnership had begun to make progress and had effectively learned from the rapid reviews relating to serious concerns. He said the partnership had completed its first local child safeguarding practice review, which had been done to a high quality. Mr Thomas said the systematic multi-agency quality audits of safeguarding practice meant the partnership had a much stronger scrutiny of data sets. He said the local system was relative to others in London and nationally, and meant they were able to provide effective support to families in the majority of circumstances. He said there were relatively low numbers of children in care or those subject to protection plans, but these had increased during the pandemic. Mr Thomas continued stating the partnership's response to the Covid pandemic had resulted in the partnership working closely together. Mr Thomas said they had

appointed three young scrutineers to be part of the partnership and had peer reviewed themselves with other Boroughs.

The Sub-Committee then heard from Mr Keith Makin, the Independent Scrutineer of the Safeguarding Partnership. Mr Makin explained his role and said he is the 'critical friend' to the partnership. He said he brought his London and country wide knowledge and challenges the partnership to perform better. He said the Partnership's handling of the covid-19 pandemic had led to fortnightly meetings to pick up on immediate issues and he was impressed with the responsiveness of the partnership.

Mr Makin said one of the challenges the partnership needed to address was the training profile. He said this needed to be strengthened however there was a process underway to do that. He said the appointment of the three young scrutineers was something different because they were in the 14-16 age bracket and not 20 plus as other partnerships had appointed. Mr Makin stated he was also impressed with the young people's voice being heard at the Scrutiny sub-committee and said that was what the partnership was aiming to do.

In relation to the wider partnership there was work underway to engage with the education sector and specialist provision, as well the independent and voluntary sectors plus the business sector. Mr Makin said the partnership aspired to make links with all these sectors who are involved in a young person's life. He said this was a journey, in which good progress was being made.

Lastly, Mr Makin said a good start had been made to engage with adult services, with a joint conference planned on domestic abuse in November 2021. He said the Adult Safeguarding Board was a statutory Board whereas the Safeguarding Children Board had evolved into a partnership. However, the arrangements meant they were still trying to work closely despite their different focus and were trying to move in the same direction.

In response to questions from members the following was noted:

- Mr Makin said over the past six to eight months, the partnership had made good progress linking up with other council services and the voluntary sector. He said each stakeholder of the partnership was using their existing networks and connections to reach out to these sectors so meaningful engagement could take place. He said one of the challenges was to make links with the business sector which he hoped could be achieved over time.
- In response to how quickly lessons are learnt from rapid reviews as opposed to serious case reviews, Mr Makin said quicker progress had been made. He said there was a much quicker turnaround, with the final production of the report being published within DfE guidelines.
- Mr Thomas added it was vital for the partnership to triangulate the information from different sources. (1) the data and what this can teach you (2) Quality Assurance and Auditing and (3) the voice of the young

person and parents, and their experienced. Mr Thomas said weight should be give to all three aspects when assessing cases.

- Councillor Wood stated it would be useful to have a data set showing the number of rapid reviews and the outcomes of these, as well as other key performance indicators that are presented to the partnership.
- **ACTION:** The Sub-Committee agreed it should receive a dashboard of data on a number of key issues such as looked after children numbers; and figures on the number of children subject to a child protection order. The Chair asked members to inform her of the key areas they'd like to see data on.
- **ACTION:** The Sub-Committee to invite the three young scrutineers to a future meeting of the Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee, once they have been appointed and have experienced the work of the partnership.

The Chair thanked Mr Thomas and Mr Makin for their presentation.

5. ANY OTHER UNRESTRICTED BUSINESS CONSIDERED TO BE URGENT

No other business was discussed at the meeting.

The meeting ended at 8.27 p.m.

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