

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

HELD AT 4.30 P.M. ON THURSDAY, 21 OCTOBER 2021

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

Members Present:

Councillor Bex White (Chair)

Councillor Victoria Obaze
Councillor Andrew Wood

Councillor Gabriela Salva Macallan
Councillor Shad Chowdhury*

Co-opted Members Present:

Dr Phillip Rice (Vice-Chair)
Joanna Hannan*
Ahmed Hussain*
Ashraf Zaman*

- Church of England Representative
- Diocese of Westminster
- Parent Governor
- Parent Governor

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Asma Begum*

Councillor Kahar Chowdhury*

Apologies:

Councillor Helal Uddin

Others Present:

Daniel Burton*
Jon Ryder*
Asiya Abdulkadir*

- Tower Hamlets Education Partnership
- Headteacher, George Green's School
- Year 12 Student, George Green's School

Officers Present:

Kay Goodacre*

- (Head of Strategic Finance, Children & Culture)

Dan Jones*
Tom Rawlings*

- (Director, Public Realm)
- (Team Leader - Design Team, Transport and Highways)

Layla Richards*

- (Head of Strategy and Policy – Children and Culture)

Jonathan Solomons

- (Strategy and Policy Manager - Children and Culture)

James Thomas*

- (Corporate Director, Children and Culture)

Farhana Zia

- (Democratic Services Officer, Committees, Governance)

*Attended Virtually - online

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Helal Uddin.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

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

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting of 2nd September 2021 were agreed to be an accurate record of the meeting and were approved by the Sub-Committee.

Variation in the order of Business

The Chair Councillor Bex White, stated that she'd like to vary the order of business taking item 4.1 and then item 5, Any other business, before returning to the remaining items on the agenda. She explained there were two updates' Officers needed to provide the Sub-Committee, however due to Officers having to leave the meeting early, the AOB items would be dealt with after the first substantive item.

Members of the Sub-Committee **AGREED** to the variation of the business for the meeting.

4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

4.1 Covid 19 Update - Secondary Schools

The Sub-Committee received a verbal update on the continued impact Covid-19 was having on secondary school education, in particular on older young people who had missed exams due to the lockdown.

Councillor Asma Begum, Cabinet Member for Children, Youth Services, Education and Equalities introduced the item saying schools had played a pivotal role in providing educational support to young people and their families as well as acting as a community hub during the lockdown. She said schools had continued to operate in difficult circumstances, playing a huge role in safeguarding and addressing the wider needs of young people.

The Sub-Committee then heard from Mr Daniel Burton, Director of Secondary Education and Partnerships, at THEP (Tower Hamlets Education Partnership) who gave a presentation on the impact Covid-19 had had on pupils who had not taken exams. Mr Burton presented the national and local perspective and made the following points:

- A survey by the Social Mobility Foundation in January 2021, showed that 73% of young people were anxious about exam cancellations, with 64% saying school closures had negatively impacted on their mental health and 73% being worried about being able to study during the lockdown.
- There was considerable uncertainty around school exams however the exam assessments and results show an increase in attainment nationally as well as locally, in 2019/20 and 2020/21.
- Year 13's and year 12 cohorts had different experiences of exam cancellation. The centre assessed grades that were to be moderated by the algorithm, were abandoned in favour of teacher assessments.
- When young people returned to school in Autumn 2020 they still had to contend with self-isolation and bubble systems, and this impacted on their learning.
- The current year 13's had experienced disruption to the GCSE's and post 16 education, whereas the current year 12's experience had been different because they were not sitting their terminal exams. Their exams for 2021, were cancelled and at that stage there was much more rigour and clarity in terms of expectations of schools.
- Mr Burton said schools in Tower Hamlets were more concerned about the current Year 13's who were more a concern than year 12's, due to stress, anxiety and preparedness for their post 16 courses and exams. Their confidence and resilience had been affected as they had not sat exams previously.
- To help support students' schools were establishing clear routines and expectations and were intervening earlier. Students were being mentored, offered extra-curricular classes with greater emphasis on health and mental well-being, as well as test and exam practise.

The Sub-Committee then heard from Mr Jon Ryder, Headteacher at George Green's School and Ms Asiya Abdulkadir, a Year 12 student at the school.

The main points made by Mr Ryder were:

- He concurred with Mr Burton the most affected cohort were the Year 13 students who had been most affected by non-exams.
- The school had a programme of study support which they provided to students at exam times, however the current Year 13 students had not experienced this, due to the pandemic and lockdown.
- Year 12 students had had a different experience. To provide an authentic experience of sitting exams, the school had put in place tests, called evidence testing to prepare current Year 12 and Year 11 students for exams, so they were prepared for the next stage of their education.
- Mr Ryder said there had been a definite impact on young people with SMH – social, emotional and mental health issues and said some of the Covid recovery money had been spent on recruiting learning

mentors, who had assisted in bridging the gap and getting students ready for being in the classrooms.

- Mr Ryder said the Covid recovery money, which had been given by government was difficult to access. He said there was too much paperwork and caveats to get to the money whereas the government ought to trust the professional judgement of teachers.
- Government needed to provide further clarity about exams for 2022. Some of the content had been dropped from some subjects but nothing further had been said about the contingency arrangements for current Year 11 students, who had been affected by school closures and had missed part of their learning. Mr Ryder said the Government needed to learn from past mistakes.

Ms Asiya Abdulkadir then spoke about her experience as a Year 12 Student at George Green's School.

- Ms Abdulkadir said she was studying Physics, Biology and Maths A-Levels and felt the school had supported her well, despite not having full exam experience.
- She said the school had provided devices to students, where their attendance was tracked, and they had followed a normal timetable of study.
- She said she had spoken to her peers. There were mixed experiences about missing school and exam preparation. Some students had taken the pandemic and lockdown in their stride whereas others had struggled to cope, with their mental health.
- Ms Abdulkadir said the five evidence tests, where the best three were taken has your exam performance had felt like an authentic and normal exam experience and she felt relaxed and prepared for future exams.
- Ms Abdulkadir said she was proud of her generation, who had had to deal with difficult circumstances, including uncertainty during exam time and for the future.

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

- The Chair stated her admiration for Ms Abdulkadir and her peers for working hard and sticking with their studies through challenging times.
- In answer to meeting the financial gaps, once the covid recovery money is no longer available, Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture, said local government would continue to lobby government for funds and would ask government to trust school leaders on how the money is spent.
- In response to what else would assist in preparing for exams, Ms Abdulkadir said the examining boards should reduce the content that

students had to learn, especially as they had missed so much of their courses and education.

- Mr Jon Ryder confirmed that in preparation for exams, mock exams would take place in December and then in March to assist students to prepare for their real exams.
- In response to if the five evidence-based tests were being well received by Universities and employers, Mr Ryder said he couldn't answer that question but would say they had wanted to make the testing regime as normal as possible and given students a genuine experience of how exams worked.
- In response to if THEP had linked up with the Tower Hamlets Partnership which included local employers and Queen Mary University about the challenges this particular cohort of students faced, Mr Burton said they had not. He said this was a good challenge for THEP to look at what careers advice was provided and how they engage with higher education providers and employers.
- In response to what was being done to develop skills such as essay writing, Mr Jon Ryder stated they continued to support young people by providing them with support and by teaching young people how and what to include in essay writing. Mr Ryder said this skill took time to develop through normal lessons and through extra-curricular work and assignments.
- In response to if the current system of examination was fit for purpose, and if greater emphasis should be on teacher assessments, Mr Jon Ryder said his view was the current system of examination was outdated and needed to be abolished. He said a much more robust system of learning and teacher assessment was needed, as everyone learns differently. He said the curriculum needed to be more boarder, but he did not believe there was the political will to change the system. Mr Burton agreed with Mr Ryder's view and said the current emphasis on terminal examinations at age 16 and then at age 18 was out of step with the rest of the world. Politicians were wedded to the idea of examinations and there wasn't the will to move away from it. Mr Burton said there was an underlying lack of trust in teachers and their ability to assess students on their performance and skill level.

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

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

1. Tower Hamlets should continue to lobby government and DfE about simplifying the process for accessing the Covid recovery money; and
2. THEP should look at ways to engage with other partners and the opportunities for those leaving school. How these gaps can be bridged for this cohort of students.

4.2 Budget and Finance

Councillor Asma Begum, Cabinet Member for Children, Youth Services, Education and Equalities introduced the items stating there were longstanding national pressures on Children and Young People services, particularly funding in relation to SEND. She said they continued to lobby government for funding especially as the service was demand-led and therefore if the demand increased, more pressure was placed on the finance budget.

The Sub-Committee then heard for Ms Kay Goodacre, Head of Strategic Finance for Children and Culture who gave a presentation on the issue. Ms Goodacre made the following points:

- High End Needs continued to be a pressure however the lobbying of government had led to an 8% increase in funding in 2021/22.
- There was a requirement to produce a high-end needs management plan for the DfE, which was previously known as the recovery plan. The nuance in wording from 'recovery' to 'management' plan shows the Government recognises the demand will not decrease but will need to be managed in the long term.
- School budgets were also under pressure. School Balances increased from £27m to £35m in 2020/21.
- Work on transparency and compliance had been undertaken with schools in relation with the Statement of Accounts. Headteachers and Business Managers within schools had been provided with training.
- A refreshed policy for schools with in-year budget deficits and cash advances had been introduced.
- Falling school roles, school closures and amalgamations continued to be an issue.
- The budget headlines were schools to receive a 2% increase in their minimum funding guarantee, High End Needs would increase by 8% however there would be a reduction in the Dedicated School Grant by 10.5%.
- In relation to future pressures the budget may face, Ms Goodacre said this related to supporting families, such as the recruitment and retention of Social Workers, greater number of families with no access to public funds, children in need of placements and reorganisation of the Youth and Early Years' service.

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

- The school balances increase of £8M was not focussed on a few schools but was spread over the sector both primary and secondary schools. The impact of Covid and schools being cautious had led to this.

- In response to if the Council was exploiting all the available funding streams/ grants for vulnerable learning, Ms Goodacre said they did their utmost to access funding however sometimes it was for the schools to apply for the funding, as illustrated by the Covid Recovery and Tuition funding. Ms Goodacre said this came with conditions and was difficult to access. She said they assisted and signposted schools accordingly.
- In relation to the School Forum, Councillor Salva-Macallan asked if the agenda and minutes from the meetings were available online. Councillor Salva-Macallan requested the dates of the meetings be noted on the Corporate Calendar, so Members were aware when meetings were taking place. Ms Goodacre responded stating the Schools forum meetings were public meetings and the agenda and minutes were published online.
 - **ACTION:** The Children & Culture Directorate to ensure meetings of the Schools Forum are added to the Corporate Calendar.
- In response to if Tower Hamlets had been hardest hit in relation to falling school rolls and demography changes, Ms Goodacre responded stating this was the current situation across London, especially inner London. She said Hammersmith & Fulham had run into financial difficulties due to falling rolls whereas Tower Hamlets had acted quickly to address this and school closures. She said it had to be accepted that London was changing, and migration trends showed less children living in London.
- In relation to the closure of schools costing £2.1m, members asked if there was a strategy in place to recoup funds. Ms Goodacre explained the costs related to the deficit the two schools in question had at the time of the closure and with falling rolls, they'd have less income coming in. She said this cost had to be picked up by the Local Authority as it had a statutory duty to do so. She said as the site is not owned by the Council, it could not sell the land to recoup the money.

The Chair thanked the attendees for their contribution to the meeting and said their input had helped members understand the pressures on the budget of the Children and Culture Directorate.

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

1. There were huge pressures facing different aspects of the Children and Culture Directorates budget. Children's social care and high-end needs budget as well as the school budgets and pressures relating to accessing funding.
2. That the Schools Forums meeting dates should be added to the Corporate Calendar, so members were aware when they met.

4.3 School Streets

Councillor Kahar Chowdhury, Cabinet Member for Highways and Public Realm introduced this item saying that as part of the Mayor's manifesto, the Council was committed to deliver fifty school streets by 2022. He said the concept was to reduce congestion at drop off and pick up times and introduce safer walking and cycling as well as reduce pollution.

The Sub-Committee then received a presentation from Mr Dan Jones, Director of Public Realm and Mr Tom Rawlings, Transport and Highways Manager.

The main points from the presentation were:

- 21 Schools Street projects had been completed, with 9 beginning construction this year. The remaining were programmed next year.
- Mr Dan Jones explained what a street school was and said this could be physical changes to the street or restrictions on vehicle access times.
- The changes being made concentrated on primary school sites however going forward would like to include secondary schools.
- Mr Jones explained the process used to consult with parents, schools and neighbours in the area.
- Two examples of schools that had been converted to School Streets were talked through in detail, with pictures showing the before and after look.
- Mr Rawlings said some of the factors taken into consideration were the number of residents who would be impacted, to offering public realm improvements such as greening and closing off roads, if this was required. Other considerations were the loss of parking, when a new zebra crossing is introduced as well as cost and timing implications such as camera installation.
- The Pandemic had impacted on the delivery of the school streets programme. Consultation with schools had been delayed due to the schools being closed. Consultation with the first tranche of schools was effective however the second tranche was affected due to the pandemic.

In response to comments and questions the following was noted:

- Councillor White asked if Public Realm had consulted with other colleagues in respect to the design materials used to engage with schools and children. Mr Rawlings stated the standard method of consultation had been used, with schools being contacted and information being disseminated via the school to parents plus leafletting of local residents asking them to respond to the consultation.
- In response to how the School Streets programme fitted into the Liveable Streets initiative, Mr Jones stated they were making sure they

did not do things twice. They were working together with the communications team to ensure residents were fully aware of the schemes and were consulted. Mr Jones said the aim of School Streets was to limit vehicles at certain times of the day but were open to residents for access.

- Councillor Wood questioned if School Streets were really working, in terms of reduction in drivers. He stated that in his neighbourhood the number of vehicles had increased and said some of the changes made, had made it more dangerous rather than safer, with parents dropping off children on a busy A road rather than parking up in the side street, where the school is located. He asked if the schemes could be reversed or made safer? Mr Rawlings said the scheme had been introduced on a trial basis and as such changes could be made. He said schools near major roads were trickier to deal with, but he would look at that.
- Councillor Obaze asked when the School Streets programme would be introduced to a school in her ward. Mr Rawlings stated the feedback from the consultation they had undertaken did not have a good return rate but a further consultation concerning Columbia Road School and Nursey would be undertaken.
- **ACTION:** Public Realm to share with the Sub-Committee the data in relation to the success of the School Streets Scheme. If it has helped to reduce accidents and near misses; and what improvement has been made to air quality.
- Councillor Salva-Macallan commented consultations should involve all the voices and should ensure concerns are addressed. She referred to a primary school and said there was land in front of the school which belonged to Tower Hamlets Homes and therefore the pace of development of a school street had been slower.

The Chair thanked the attendees for their contribution to the meeting and said their input had helped members understand what the aims of the School Streets programme were.

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

1. The School Street scheme was an exciting programme bringing change to busy school areas. Public Realm should re-examine the scheme at Arnhem Wharf and be proactive in collating data, monitoring the number of vehicles and near misses and make changes accordingly.
2. Public Realm should look to work with other departments in the Council to ensure there was more joint working, in terms of design of consultations, which involved schools, parents and residents but also the school's ecology or environment committees as well as working with THEP who can assist in disseminating information.

3. In respect of pressures on budgets, there is a possibility there could be more money provided for consultation for streets schools and therefore consideration should be given to how this is used to optimise consultation especially as school budgets are stretched.

5. ANY OTHER UNRESTRICTED BUSINESS CONSIDERED TO BE URGENT

The Chair, Councillor Bex White stated the Sub-Committee would receive two updates', one relating to the SEND Inspection and the other to why a Serious Case Review had not been undertaken in relation to the girls who went off to Syria.

SEND Inspection – outcome and next steps

Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children & Culture, stated that at the last meeting of the Sub-Committee the outcome of the inspection was embargoed and as such the findings could not be shared with the Sub-Committee. However, the report relating to the SEND Inspection was published by the DfE on the 27th September 2021. A copy of the report had been emailed to Members. He said the report set out the strengths and weaknesses relating to SEND and it was fair to say that the DfE considered the self-evaluation completed by the Council and its partners to be an honest assessment of the areas that required improvement.

Mr Thomas stated that not all aspects of local provision across the partnership was good. He said the four weaknesses highlighted - quality of education, health and care plans, waiting times for speech and language therapy provision, waiting times for ASD assessment and comprehensive engagement and communication with parents and carers were going to be the areas where the partners would be focussing their efforts. He said in terms of what happened next, the Council and the CCG would draw up a written statement of action, looking at these areas, which they had to submit by the 24th December 2021 deadline. Mr Thomas said they would be working with the DfE and NHS England to ensure government oversight, support, and challenge. Mr Thomas added that the inspection of Tower Hamlets was towards the end of a five -year cycle of inspection and usually a re-inspection would occur after 2 years. However due to the interruption caused by Covid-19, this was not going to happen. Mr Thomas said the government was introducing a new framework of inspection and any follow up inspection would likely be part of the new framework.

Mr Thomas said the sub-committee was to deep dive the issue at its February meeting, where further scrutiny of the SEND Inspection would take place.

The Chair, Councillor Bex White confirmed the update on the actions taken, following the SEND inspection was scheduled for the February 2022 meeting.

Serious Case Review -Syria

In respect to the questions raised about why a serious case review was not undertaken in relation to the girls from Bethnal Green who had left for Syria, Mr Thomas confirmed he was in receipt of the letter from Members and said further information about the previous decision was being gathered. He explained a serious case review was undertaken by the Local Safeguarding Board however due to changes made by Government in 2019, the Local Safeguarding Board had evolved into the Local Safeguarding Partnership, where the onus of responsibility is shared equally between the Council, CCG and Police. He said the Partnership and the Independent Scrutineer would be examining the evidence, recordings and notes from when the incident took place in 2015 and would be discussing this.

Mr Thomas said he would share the outcome of their discussions with members at the next meeting of the Sub-Committee.

Time Change of future meetings

The Chair explained that due to the Sub-Committee's remit of Children and Education and with most meetings involving young people, she was proposing a time change for all future meetings, from 6:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. to allow for young people to participate.

Councillor White asked members of the Sub-Committee to let her know their views regarding this and said she'd be writing to the Head of Democratic Services and the Monitoring Officer requesting for this change.

The meeting ended at 6.38 p.m.

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