

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

HELD AT 4.30 P.M. ON WEDNESDAY, 8 DECEMBER 2021

INFORMAL MEETING

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

Members Present:

Councillor Bex White (Chair)*

Councillor Shad Chowdhury*

Councillor Victoria Obaze*

Councillor Gabriela Salva-Macallan*

Councillor Helal Uddin*

Councillor Andrew Wood*

Co-opted Members Present:

Dr Phillip Rice (Vice-Chair)*

Joanna Hannan*

Abena Adedji*

Ahmed Hussain*

Ashraf Zaman*

– Church of England Representative

– Diocese of Westminster

– Parent Governor

– Parent Governor

– Parent Governor

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Apologies:

Others Present:

Farhan Hoque*

Hamida Begum*

– CLICC

– CLICC

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Officers Present:

Robert Bielby*

– (Service Manager Children Looked After & Leaving Care Service, Children's Social Care)

Claudette Blake*

– Fostering Team

Johanna Burke-Richards*

– Assessment and Intervention Team

Hasan Faruq*

– Participation & Engagement Manager

Lissa-Marie Minnis*

– Service Manager Regulated Services & Resources

Charlotte Moodie*

– Team Leader of the Edge of Care Service

Sam Nair*	– Principal Social Worker - Children with Disabilities Team
Clare Noyes*	– Family Support & Protection Team
Jonathan Solomons*	– (Strategy and Policy Manager - Children and Culture)
James Thomas*	– (Corporate Director, Children and Culture)
Farhana Zia	– (Democratic Services Officer, Committees, Governance)

Attended online – virtually

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received from members.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests were made by members.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting of 21st October were agreed to be an accurate record of the meeting.

The Chair said the minutes would be formally approved at the next meeting as this meeting was an informal meeting of the of the sub-committee.

Variation in the order of Business

The Chair, Councillor Bex White, stated that item 4.2 would be taken first, followed by item 4.1, so that the guests invited to the first substantive item could join the meeting virtually.

4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

4.1 Outcome for Children we Care for and Care Leavers

Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture introduced the item and said the council's corporate parenting responsibilities, were such that the child in care should be thought of as our own child. He said the Council was like the extended family of the child in care. He said the Council had a number of resources at its disposal, and he was keen for the Council to think about what more could be done as corporate parents for the children that we look after. Mr Thomas said the key to the success of looking after children in the care of the council, were the teams which supported them. He praised the work of social workers, teachers, and health colleagues as well as the exceptional work of foster carers, residential care workers and workers who support young people in semi-independent accommodation.

The Sub-Committee the heard from Mr Hasan Faruq, Participation & Engagement Manager, Youth and Community Services. He said his team supported young people in care and was responsible for overseeing the work of the Youth Council and Young Mayor. He said two members of the Children Living & Leaving Care Council (CLICC) were present for the meeting. Mr Farhan Hoque, CLICC member and Young People's Coordinator, and Hamida Begum member and Deputy Chair of CLICC. Mr Faruq said they would talk about their experiences and projects they have been involved in.

The main points to note were:

- The CLICC had designed a Care Leaver App, which assisted Care Leavers to navigate the services available.
- The CLICC had organised a residential trip to Wales, for Young People to build their communication skills, self-belief, and personal achievement.
- They had worked with the Corporate Parenting Board and had devised a wish list of the things they'd like the Board to action, such as providing a wrap around service and smoother transition from one service/situation to another.
- The CLICC Team had worked with Queen Mary University to talk about their experience of being in care and how professionals can improve that experience. Hamida said there were times when the child is 'lost in the system' and their voice is not heard.
- A Podcast was being produced, which would be released in January 2022. The young people will learn new skills in how to produce and edit a podcast.

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

- The Chair, Councillor Bex White asked Hamida to explain what she meant by 'lost in the system.' Hamida said this meant the repetition of their story to various professionals, and professionals not being aware of their back story when talking to them. She said the podcast would endeavour to explain more about these experiences.

The Sub-Committee then received a further presentation for Mr Leo Major, Head of Service Children Looked After & Through Care.

The main points to note were:

- Following the 2019 Ofsted report the Service model for the service has been strengthened, with various teams supporting Children Looked After (CLA) by the Council.
- Each CLA Team is led by a Team Manager and has up to 6 Practitioners who are a mix of Advanced Practitioners, Social Workers, and New Qualified Workers.

- Key Performance Indicators and Audit findings have been used to improve partnership working and the recruitment and retention of social workers as well as foster carers.
- Key challenges included the quality and impact of supervision on practice effectiveness and direct work and influence of child/young person's voice.
- Other priorities include the refresh of the Local Offer 2022-23, embedding learning from audit activity, QMUL workshops and other feedback; as well as increasing the proportion young people, achieving at least one qualification at Level 2 for Maths and English.

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

- The Chair, Councillor Bex White asked why there was a big difference in the number of male and female children coming into care. She asked if the statistics were similar in other neighbouring boroughs? Mr Major said a high percentage of boys and young men were in care than girls and this picture was not dissimilar to other boroughs. Mr Thomas added the age profile for children coming into care had two spikes, one in early years and the other in the 13+ age range. He said those coming into care in the early years needed to be found permanent homes, adoption or special guardianship. The spike in the 13+ group was related to unaccompanied asylum seekers, which were predominately males.
- Referring to the future priorities slide, Councillor Wood asked how much of the things listed related to maintaining the Ofsted rating or were they pushing for better outcomes? Mr Thomas said he had asked Mr Major to be ambitious and improve the outcomes of children in care and care leavers, rather than chase an Ofsted rating. He said they do want to get to an 'outstanding' rating eventually, but the focus should remain on the children they looked after. Mr Major added he was being aspirational and wanted to ensure they engaged well children, by increasing the educational attainment of children in care and care leavers.

The Chair thanked the attendees for their contribution to the meeting and said their input had been invaluable in helping members understand the work of the Children in Care and Care leavers Team and how they add value to the corporate responsibility of the Council as corporate parents.

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

1. Labels matter to young people, such as acronyms used to describe young people in care and the naming of mental health services. The Chair said it was good to hear the Council was listening to young

people and moving away for labels, young people were not comfortable with.

2. The Sub-Committee would like to see the social care dashboard, which should be presented to the sub-committee regularly, for sub-committee members to keep an oversight on trends and statistics relating to services provided by Children Services.
3. Unaccompanied minors were also spoken about and the Sub-Committee needs to keep abreast of how this develops as this may be an increased pressure on the Council.

4.2 Children's Services Improvement including Covid 19 update

The Sub-Committee received a verbal update in relation to the improvement in Children's Services, including an update on the impact of Covid-19 to the services provided.

Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture introduced the item saying significant pressures were being faced by the children social care service who were delivering services to support families. He said there had been a sustained increase in demand and some pressure on staffing capacity, due to illness.

Mr Thomas said overall the evidence for quality and performance was reassuring. He said when they were last inspected by Ofsted in 2019, a good judgment was received. He said the evidence showed they had sustained that good level of performance. He said there would be a resumption of external inspection and scrutiny in 2022, which he welcomed as well as a peer review by the Local Government Association, to look at front-end services and child protection work.

Lastly, Mr Thomas commented on the shocking and distressing murder of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, in Solihull, which had received much coverage and reaction. Mr Thomas said a reasonable question to ask would be if something as shocking could happen here in Tower Hamlets. He said there could never be a guarantee that children will not be abused however, the extreme levels of abuse in Arthur's case are rare. Mr Thomas cited Professor Eileen Munro's report saying all leaders must work to reduce harm and risk, but child abuse could not be eliminated. He said for this reason harm to children remained a top corporate risk and various mitigations were in place to combat this, including the Local Safeguarding Partnership, whose role is to externally quality assure the systems in place.

Mr Sam Nair, the Principal Social Worker then gave a presentation on the different aspects of social work covered by Children Services and how they had coped with changes to the way they work during to the pandemic. Mr Nair was accompanied by Ms Charlotte Moodie, Team Leader of the Edge of Care Service, Ms Johanna Burke-Richards, advanced practitioner, Assessment and Intervention Team, Ms Clare Noyes Family Support & Protection team and Ms Claudette Blake, advanced practitioner, Fostering Team.

Mr Nair commented on the restructure of the Youth Service, Early Help and the Youth Justice Service and said this was now complete. He said the linking of services meant there was a joined-up approach to delivering services. Mr Nair said there had been a significant rise in demand due to Covid-19, poverty issues associated with it, plus a rise in the number of asylum-seeking unaccompanied children. Domestic abuse and emotional wellbeing of children had also been a significant factor during the pandemic.

The Sub-Committee then heard from each service area:

Early Help

Mr Nair stated the Early Help team had been restructured August 2020, with social workers present in schools and a link to the MASH service – Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub. He said the graph, on page 25, showed the throughput from MASH to the Early Help team. Ms Charlotte Moodie, from the Edge of Care team talked through a case study relating to her service.

Edge of Care Team

The main points to note were:

- The edge of care team was a specialist adolescent service working with young people aged 11-17. The focus of the team was to work with the Individual and family to provide support.
- The focus of their work was prevention – to avoid family breakdowns and reunification work – to return children back home.
- Difficulties faced during Covid-19, were face to face visits, staff and family risk assessments, access to PPE. Developing new ways to meeting with vulnerable children, online and outside were possible.
- Ms Moodie then went through a case study outlining how they had supported a family in crisis.

Youth Justice & Young People

Mr Nair said the Youth Service and Youth Justice Service were much more integrated and were making good progress in reducing the number of first-time entrants and reoffenders. He said there was still work, to do to ensure the new service begins to function as one service as well as prepare for the Youth Justice Inspection which was expected in early 2022. Referring to Exploitation, Mr Nair said they were continuing to work with the Police to disrupt activity with a continued emphasis on risk assessments and care plans ensuring these remained robust. Mr Nair said it is vital for the teams to continue to have face to face contact with vulnerable children and this remained a priority, despite the pandemic. Mr Nair said MASH had seen a significant increase in demand, regarding domestic violence referrals and concerns about children's wellbeing. Ms Johanna Burke-Richards, advanced practitioner, Assessment and Intervention Team talked through a case study relating to her service.

Assessment and Intervention Team

The main points to note were:

- Ms Burke -Richards went through a case study outlining how they had dealt with a case of neglect and had supported a family where the father was suffering a mental health crisis.
- Ms Burke-Richards outline the challenges faced, from increased workloads due to the number of referrals, refusal of home visits by families due to the anxiety caused by the Pandemic, to adopting innovative ways to work with children and families, be it a doorstep visit in full PPE and virtual visits via online meetings and phone calls.
- Ms Burke-Richards described the different tools they used to make their assessments and how they worked with children to obtain their views, feelings and wishes.

Family Support and Protection Service

Mr Nair stated that unlike the front-door services which take referrals, the Children and Families team worked with families to support and prevent family breakdowns. Mr Nair said there had been a rise in the number of children who required Child Protection Plans, since April 2021, when schools returned to fully in-person teaching. He said two additional posts had been agreed to cope with the demand. He said staff morale remained good and links to the LEAP (pupil referral unit) has been strengthened with a dedicated social worker dealing with child exploitation and serious youth violence. Ms Clare Noyes, Family Support & Protection talked through a case study relating to her service.

Family Support and Protection Team

The main points to note were:

- Ms Noyes went through a case study outlining how they had dealt with a case of domestic abuse and had supported the family, during the pandemic.
- She said it was vital for the social worker to meeting with the children separately and therefore they had agreed to use the a nearby school playground, to allow for face-to-face meetings.
- Ms Noyes said the risk assessment toolkit was used to assess the risk and interventions such as a 'cool down' space, were introduced. Information on how to access domestic abuse help groups as well as ensuring the family knew how to contact the police, using 55 to alert police of domestic abuse, were also provided.

Children in Care and Care Leavers

Mr Nair said as the Sub-Committee had received an in-depth update on this, he would touch upon the main headlines. He said that as mentioned before there had been an increase in the number of children in care, particularly unaccompanied asylum seekers. He said the Children Living in Care Council (CLICC) had been strengthened by widening the involvement of young people with other care leavers. He said further progress was required to promote apprenticeships across the council.

Foster Care

Mr Nair, stated Foster Carers continued to manage the demand of Covid, caring for young people with resilience and ingenuity. He said the “Mockingbird” project had provided a robust level of peer support to carers, especially as the recruiting of carers has become increasingly difficult. Mr Nair said the service needed to strengthen its social media presence for recruitment of carers and possibly consider developing an offer of tax exemption for foster carers. Ms Claudette Blake, advanced practitioner from the Fostering Team talked through a case study relating to her service.

Fostering Team

The main points to note were:

- The Mockingbird foster care project was a hub and spoke model of care developed in Seattle, Washington State, USA.
- LBTH was one of 8 pilot Local Authorities trialling the new model. The aim of the model was to provide safety, stability and permanency for children and young people in local authority care.
- The mockingbird project is an evidence-based model, which has led to significant improvement in the outcomes for children and young people.
- The benefits of the project as lead to the establishment of foster ‘communities’ whereby children have a safe and stable environment to grow and learn. It has increased stability and retention of placements and as provided carers with a natural break. This has led to positive relationships for children, with social workers being able to do hands on social work.

Social Care Academy

Mr Nair provided the Sub-Committee with statistical information on how the Social Care Academy, had continued to recruit and retain staff. Mr Nair said 94 members of staff had been hired.

Assurance and Future Challenges

Lastly, Mr Nair said the key to social work was the quality assurance provided by external inspections and peer reviews, which would continue to be a feature in 2022. Mr Nair highlighted the future challenges for Children Services.

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

- The Chair, Councillor Bex White commented that partnership working, and wellbeing of staff were key themes in all the case studies and said these were important pillars to ensure children and families were supported.
- The Chair asked, if Plan B was implemented by Government would face to face meetings continue to happen for those at risk? Mr James Thomas responded stating they would continue to have face to face contact under any future lockdown.
- Councillor Wood said the case studies highlighted the important role schools play in identifying cases of neglect, domestic violence etc and asked how Children Services were dealing with children that were not in school and those coming from other countries? Mr James Thomas said this had been a major focus throughout the pandemic especially with children being out of school for a prolonged period. He said additional tracking systems were in place and said they worked in partnership with the schools to ensure contact was established especially when a child had been out of school for some time. He said they were looking at ways to strengthen the link between Health Visiting and School Nursing to pick up on children that were not enrolled for a school place.
- In relation to new arrivals to the country, Mr Thomas said it was difficult to establish contact with the child or the family when there was no awareness of them. He said this was a difficult area to ensure 100%, that children were not at risk. He said this was a national issue.
- Mr Nair added that they continued to work with their health partners to assist in the scenario as described above.
- Mr Ashraf Zaman asked if Children Services worked with the GP care group, to identify at risk children, especially due to the lack of face-to-face contact? Mr Thomas responded stating this had been a key focus of the multi-agency response to the pandemic. He said he chaired the Children Partnership 'silver group' and this had been a standing question for the group – 'Where are you at resuming face to face contact and are there any staffing capacity issue to deliver the service?'. Mr Thomas said it was clear that during the 1st lockdown too many services were withdrawn. Children's social care services, schools and health visiting had resumed face to face contact, but GP services were lagging. Mr Thomas said this was due to the exceptional pressures faced by health colleagues, in primary health care.
- Councillor Salva-Macallan asked if the data for refugees and asylum seekers could be provided to the sub-committee and asked if there needed to be more joined up work. Mr Thomas said they were working jointly with others, especially given the added challenge of hosting asylum hotels within the borough.

- In relation to if there was enough PPE available, should the country go into lockdown again, Mr Thomas said there was enough and said they were well prepared for any further lockdown.

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 on Children Services.

5. ANY OTHER UNRESTRICTED BUSINESS CONSIDERED TO BE URGENT

The Chair provided updates in relation to the following:

Serious Case Review – Syria

Mr James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture said the evidence in relation to this case had been collated and the Local Safeguarding Partnership were to discuss the case, tomorrow at their meeting of 9th December 2021. He said once the review was complete, the written response would be shared with members of the Sub-Committee.

Appointment of Sponsor

Referring to the email sent by Councillor Wood, in relation to the appointment of Mulberry Schools Trust as sponsor to Wood Wharf Primary School, Mr James Thomas said he would provide a point-by-point answer to Councillor Wood.

Resignation

Mr Ahmed Hussain, co-optee Parent Governor resigned, stating the new time of 4:30 p.m. was difficult for him to attend. He thanked the Chair and Sub-Committee members for their understanding and said this would be his last meeting. He said he'd be grateful if the response to the review case could be shared with him also.

The Chair, on behalf of the Sub-Committee expressed her sadness at Mr Ahmed's decision and said the new timing were agreed, so young people can attend meetings of the sub-committee. She thanked Mr Ahmed for his contributions to the work of the sub-committee and said he would be missed.

The meeting ended at 6.35 p.m.

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