

**LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS**

**MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE**

**HELD AT 6.30 P.M. ON THURSDAY, 12 OCTOBER 2023**

**COUNCIL CHAMBER - TOWN HALL, WHITECHAPEL**

**Members Present in Person:**

Councillor Bodrul Choudhury      -(Chair)

Councillor Ahmodul Kabir

Councillor Bellal Uddin

Councillor Leelu Ahmed

Councillor Sabina Akhtar

Councillor Shahaveer Shubo Hussain

**Other Members Present:**

Councillor Maium Talukdar      -(Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Education, Youth and Lifelong Learning (Statutory Deputy Mayor))

**Co-optee's Present in Person:**

Dr Phillip Rice      -(Church of England Representative)

Joanna Hannan      -(Diocese of Westminster Representative)

Ashraf Zaman      -(Parent Governor)

**Co-optee's In Attendance Virtually:**

Shiblu Miah      -(Muslim community representative)

**Officers Present in Person:**

Anna Murphy      (Strategy And Policy Officer)

Susannah Beasley-Murray      (Divisional Director of Supporting Families)

Layla Richards      (Head of Strategy and Policy – Children and Culture)

Justina Bridgeman      Democratic Services Officer (Committee)

**Officers In Attendance Virtually:**

James Thomas      (Corporate Director, Children's Services)

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Shafi Ahmed, Abena Adeji and Nafisa Ahmed, Parent Governors respectively.

**2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests.

**3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the Sub Committee meeting held on 11 July 2023 were approved and signed as a correct record of proceedings. See item 5 for further details.

**4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION**

Councillor Maium Talukdar, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Education, Youth and Lifelong Learning, provided a brief overview of priorities for 2023/24 to the sub-committee, as apologies were given at the first meeting of the municipal year.

Councillor Talukdar emphasised the success of the free school meals programme for primary schools, which has now been expanded for secondary schools in the borough, and early results show a 75% overall increase in demand. Updates on the Education Maintenance Allowance and university bursaries were given, as were details on the expansion of the youth service with £13.7 million investment and a further £1.1million to improve the Special Educational Needs and Disability service (SEND).

Councillor Talukdar also noted the Corporate Parenting Strategy, agreed by Cabinet in July, to build upon the work to support looked after children and also the recognition given by the National Justice Board on the policy assurance framework as an example of good practice. This is evidenced by the decline in first time entrance to the services and a testament to the hard work of officers and partners.

The sub-committee were informed that 85% of GCSE students achieved grade 94 in English and 77% in maths, which are improvements from 2019. Councillor Talukdar noted the good work from the 'Every Chance for Every Child' forum and the upcoming Young Mayor's election. The service is prepared for the OFSTED inspection and will continue to provide excellent provision. Finally James, Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture, who is leaving the organisation was praised for his dedication and service to children in the borough.

Further to questions from the sub-committee, Councillor Maium Talukdar;

- Clarified that the £1.1 million will be invested in the service with consideration to be given for further funding to combat the ongoing national challenges.
- Confirmed that the overall 75% improvement figure relates to school children now receiving lunch at school. The programme is in the base budget, which promotes healthy eating and will continue as long as the current administration in office. Consideration will be given to extend the programme to faith schools and other independent schools in the borough.
- Explained that co-production entails ensuring children's voices are heard and supported, as per the council's strategies.
- Clarified that parents who have concerns in regards to a particular school, should talk to the teachers in the first instance, it should then be raised it with the Chair of Governors if a response is not forthcoming. Any queries and complaints received by Councillors are raised with Members Enquires if responses are not satisfactory. These in turn can be forwarded to the Education Department.

#### **4.1 Children's Services Inspection Preparation**

Councillor Maium Talukdar introduced Susannah Beasley-Murray, Director of Supporting Families, who gave a brief overview on the ongoing preparation on the upcoming inspection.

Ms Beasley-Murray outlined the extensive work undertaken, which lead to a good OFSTED rating in in 2019, following the inadequate rating given in 2017. This included the work of the Continuous Improvement Board, which is chaired by the Director of Childrens Services who oversees the improvement work. This Board considers robust quality assurance measures via data and audit. There is a clear improvement plan and weekly and monthly detailed management reports. There are fortnightly inspection readiness meetings chaired by the Director of Supporting Families. These are conducted to ensure that children's services are fully equipped for the inspection and the service remains focused on best practice.

Information on the inspection process were outlined to the sub-committee, detailing a call to the Director of Children's Services which will announce the inspection for the following week. Annex A data documents will be sent to OFSTED the next day, along with 12 audited cases for detailed evaluation. In the next assessment there is a new Care leaver category which will be judged.

Ms Beasley-Murray went through the presentation and then gave an update on; the number of children which are supported i.e. CIN, CP and CLA KPI's highlighted, the areas of focus which include the initial health assessments, care and pre-proceeding timescales and placement stability issues. The sub-committee were informed that re-referral numbers have decreased in

comparison to other local authorities and that short-term placements stability have improved.

Internal scrutiny is a key factor to improved performance and robust audits, dip samples and thematic reviews are routinely undertaken. Strong relationships to support children is at the centre of the service and the Learning Academy ensures continual staff development and retention despite national shortages.

The creation of a multi-agency support team to integrate the front doors for early help and children's social care, will assist in providing the right support for child and families within their immediate extended families. To support this aim there is support given to families to try and prevent needs escalating. 400 family group conferences take place yearly to support families. There is a 'Edge of Care' service and also strong early help.

External scrutiny is welcomed with two external reviews undertaken since the last sub-committee meeting. In particular, with Mark Riddell, the National Implementation Advisor for Care, who gave positive feedback on the leadership and management approach and work with care leavers. The main priorities remain tackling domestic abuse, neglect and harm outside the home, as is ensuring staff are continually trained to effectively work with families and partner agencies to care for children in the borough.

Further to questions from the sub-committee, Susannah Beasley-Murray;

- Clarified that although high staff turnover in the sector is a national issue, Tower Hamlets has retained staff longer than other local authorities due in part that staff have stated they enjoy working in Tower Hamlets, have manageable caseloads and Learning Academy supporting career development. 25 newly qualified social workers have recently been accepted. A five year support package has been developed and 24% of staff have worked in the borough for over 10 years and staff have leadership opportunities.
- Explained that exit interviews for staff are voluntary and there are a range of reasons for leaving. Some relate to leaving the profession after the pandemic or taking career breaks.
- Noted that considerable work with faith groups, the voluntary sector and police is routinely undertaken to educate, prevent and intervene where necessary Programmes such as the 'Repair Model' and 'Positive Change Service' are ways to interact and Therapeutic groups, children and family centres, early help workers, partners and schools continue to work together in a multi-agency approach.
- Explained that external assurance is welcomed to improve the service and supporting care leavers until 25 years old is integral to this. The Kit Kat Terrace late night Wednesdays now have people there to assist in education, training and employment needs for care leavers.

- Affirmed that the recommendations outlined in the previous report are considered and evidence is provided for OFSTED's next inspection.

**RESOLVED** that:

1. That the presentation be noted.

#### **4.2 Supporting Families, Key Strategies - Children and Families**

Councillor Maium Talukdar introduced Layla Richards, Head of Strategy & Commissioning (Children's Services), who provided an overview on the Children and Families Strategy formed under the leadership of the 'Every Chance for every Child Forum', and co-chaired by Councillor Maium Talukdar.

Ms Richards discussed the strategy, which will be delivered in partnership with a range of agencies. It's designed to ensure that all children in the borough have the same opportunities to achieve success, despite the present economic conditions and concerns around child health in early years, the decline in school attendance and wellbeing following the pandemic.

The sub-committee were informed of the engagement and analysis so far, the role of partners as champions of children to keep them safe and, the views of young people, which is integral to the developing strategy. Ms Richards also outlined the allocation of deliverables and proposed an annual stock take to ensure accountability. Consideration will be given to further opportunities or challenges that require a partnership response. The six priority outcomes were noted;

- A great start in life
- A healthy childhood
- Support for good mental health and wellbeing
- The right support for children with special educational needs and disabilities and their families
- Safe and Secure
- Achieve their best in education and opportunities to develop a career.

Plus two cross-cutting priorities:

- Support families in the cost of living and child poverty crisis
- Champion co-production, equality and anti-racism

Further to questions from the sub-committee, Layla Richards and Susannah Beasley-Murray:

- Clarified that the Family Hub is a service that works in partnership with the police, housing and health departments and the Children and Family centres to support early help.

- Explained that school attendance details are monitored and dealt with as part of the multi-agency support team along, with the education welfare officers who undertake daily checks. As data was not included in the presentation, it will be provided to the sub-committee for review.
- Explained that mental health is a key priority within the strategy, as many young people have concerns on how to access services. Partnership with Bernardo's and CAMHS (Child Adolescent Mental Health) takes place as does continual work with schools. Consideration has been given on ways to commission mental health services for further support.
- Clarified that the Children and Families Partnership Executive has been working to address poverty and providing support for full access to benefit entitlements through the task and finish group.
- Confirmed available data on the link between overcrowding, mental health and attendance will be provided to the sub-committee for review.

**RESOLVED** that:

1. The school attendance statistics for Tower Hamlets to be provided to the sub-committee for review.
2. Any existing data on the link between overcrowding, mental health and attendance will be provided to the sub-committee for review.
3. That the presentation be noted.

### **4.3 Youth Services Update**

Susannah Beasley-Murray, Director of Supporting Families, presented an overview of the current commissioning of youth service provision, internal delivery and governance of the development of Young Tower Hamlet.

Ms Beasley-Murray outlined the current £1.2million commissions of contracts within the borough and the KPI targets to date. This includes specialist delivery four short term contracts to support the Somali groups youth work for the next 11 months, which began in September 2023. Funding for long term arrangements are currently being sourced for Youth Service providers within the Council for quarter 4 of the 2023/24 municipal year.

Other notable achievements included; the young carers support groups, assisting the young Mayor's election scheduled for December, and Youth Council, where around 45 children enhance their public speaking skills, participation work with care leavers, a team building residential and weekend away, in conjunction with the Exploitation Service and Youth Justice team.

The sub-committee were informed that an interim team delivering universal delivery of youth support and alongside there being a strong sports provision

Two have been refurbished, Golston Street and Columbia Road, in order to provide universal youth provision, with two further sites due for October end. Targeted youth provision is being delivered by the 'Break the Cycle' team there has been increased staff to provide assistance to young people including young carers and to prevent vulnerable young people from entering the criminal justice system. The consideration will be given to charities and voluntary groups, an increased workforce and a youth service to enhance the provision in all wards.

Further to questions from the sub-committee, Susannah Beasley-Murray and Kelly Duggan, Head of Youth Justice Service;

- Confirmed that further data on Youth Service uptake, including a breakdown of new contacts and the gender split in participants, to be provided to the sub-committee for review.
- Clarified that there is specialised youth provision commissioned by the council i.e. health for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), children transitioning for primary to secondary school and LGBTQI+.
- Explained that the requirements for Integrated Detached team staff have various levels of qualification depending on the level of seniority. Group interviews and team building exercises are often used to see the skills which are required to engage young people.
- Confirmed that all provision is free admission and partnerships work closely with schools. The aim is to give children a safe space in every ward and build on skills learnt, including feedback from parents and carers. Consideration to use other local spaces is ongoing and any suggestions from the sub-committee would be gratefully received.
- Noted that publicity is available via the council website, flyers with a Young Tower Hamlets quick response (QR) code, a two dimensional barcode with full details of council services are available. Details have also been sent to the Head teachers Forum. The Detached Team are now advertising around local areas.
- Clarified that timetables are updated daily with structured times for various ages within the borough.
- Confirmed that each centre has a male and female staff members and specific sessions that are safe for girls and young women. This also extends to teams working with the community to build trust with young women and girls. A breakdown on equalities monitoring data for employees of the youth service, specifically gender will be provided to the sub-committee for review.

**RESOLVED** that:

1. That further data on Youth Service uptake, including a breakdown of new contacts and the gender split in participants, will be provided to the sub-committee for review.
2. That a breakdown on equalities monitoring data for employees of the youth service, specifically gender to be provided to the sub-committee for review.
3. That the presentation be noted.

**5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS CONSIDERED TO BE URGENT**

Sub-committee members requested details on the uptake levels for the Universal Free Meals initiative and evaluation data from the Queen Mary University and the University of Newcastle be made available to sub-committee members, outlined in the minutes from 11 July 2023 meeting.

The Chair and sub-committee also thanked James Thomas, Corporate Director for Children and Culture, for his contribution to the sub-committee and Tower Hamlets Council.

**RESOLVED** that:

1. That details on the update levels for the University Free Meals initiative and evaluation data from the Queen Mary University and the University of Newcastle be circulated to sub-committee members.

The meeting ended at 8.20 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Bodrul Choudhury

Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee