

# Overview & Scrutiny

## Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission Minutes of 6th October 2021

### Official Attendees for the record

Cllr Sophie Conway (Chair)  
Cllr Margaret Gordon (Vice Chair)  
Cllr Lynne Troughton  
Cllr James Peters  
Cllr Humaira Garasia

### Connected Virtually

Cllr Caroline Selman  
Cllr Anya Sizer  
Jo Macleod (HASGA)  
Shabnum Hassan (PG Representative)  
Ernell Watson (Free Churches)  
Salmah Kansara (North London Muslim Community Centre)  
Volkan Ganidagli (Hackney Youth Parliament)

### In attendance:

- Cllr Anntionette Bramble, Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Children's Social Care
- Cllr Caroline Woodley, Cabinet Member for Families, Early Years, Parks & Play
- Jacquie Burke, Group Director, Education & Children's Services
- Diane Benjamin, Director of Children's Social Care
- Annie Gammon, Head of Hackney Learning Trust and Director of Education
- Lisa Aldridge, Head of Safeguarding & Quality Assurance
- Brendan Finnegan, Head of Youth Justice Service
- Donna Thomas, Head of Early Years & Early Help
- Peter Algacs (Team Leader, Young Hackney)

### Cllr Conway in the Chair

#### **Welcome and introduction**

The Chair welcomed members and officers to the meeting and those members of the public who were viewing the livestream. It was noted that this was a hybrid meeting with members of the Commission in attendance and with officers connecting virtually.

The Chair also welcomed Jacquie Burke to the meeting, the new Group Director for Education and Children's Services.

It was noted that since the last meeting, the Commission had amended the Constitution to enable young people to be represented at its meetings from both Hackney Youth Parliament and Hackney Tomorrow (Hackney Care Council). It was noted that the Commission would facilitate young people's involvement in its work as well as attendance at its meetings.

At the start of the meeting as only three members of the Commission were present, the meeting was not quorate and therefore not able to make formal decisions.

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## 1. Apologies for absence

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from the following members of the Commission:

- Cllr Caroline Selman (Connected virtually)
- Cllr Anya Sizer (Connected virtually)
- Jo Macleod (Co-opted member) (Connected virtually)
- Shabnum Hassan (Connected virtually)
- Salmah Kansara, North London Muslim Community Centre (Connected virtually)
- Ernell Watson (Connected virtually)
- Cllr Sarah Young
- Steven Olalere (PG)
- Richard Brown (CoE Representative)
- Michael Lobenstein (UOHC Representative)

## 2. Urgent Items / Order of Business

2.1 There were no urgent items and the agenda was as had been published.

## 3. Declarations of interest

3.1 The following declarations were received by members of the Commission:

- Cllr Margaret Gordon was a member of the Member Oversight Board for Children's Social Care and would not participate in Item 4 - the Ofsted Focused Visit;
- Shabnum Hassan, was a governor at a primary school in Hackney;
- Cllr Sizer was a trustee of Ivy Street Family Centre;
- Jo McLeod was a school governor at a primary school in Hackney;
- Salmah Kansara worked at a Children's Centre and would therefore not participate in item 6 (Early Years Strategy & Reconfiguration of Children's Centres).

## 4. Ofsted Focused Visit

4.1 Since the Commission received an update on the improvement plan for Children's Social care in July, Ofsted have undertaken a further focused visit within Children's Services to assess arrangements for Children in Need and those children on a Child Protection Plan. The outcomes of this focused visit were published in a letter by Ofsted on September 7th 2021.

### Cabinet member introduction

4.2 The Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Children's Social Care introduced this item. Managers and staff from across the service have reflected on the outcomes of the last full inspection and made substantial progress in improving services for young people and their families. Whilst the outcome of recent focused visit (July 2021) noted that there were areas which still required improvement, it was clear that there were many positive aspects to service provision and that as a whole, the service was moving forward in a positive direction of travel which would hopefully meet local ambitions for the service to be rated as 'good' and 'outstanding' in future inspections.

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- 4.3 The Cabinet member also noted that whilst the pace of change was not as quick as they would have hoped, service improvements have been developed for the longer-term to ensure the sustainability of provision. The new appointment of both Group Director (for Education & Children's Services) and Director (for Children's Social Care) would also cement these improvements. The Members Oversight Board (jointly Chaired with the Mayor) continued to maintain an overview of service improvements in children's social care alongside the staff board which is to be Chaired by the Group Director.
- 4.4 The Cabinet member wished to thank all staff for the hard work in supporting improvements across the Children & Families Service.

### Children and Families Service

- 4.5 The Group Director, Director and Head of Safeguarding & Learning noted that the Ofsted inspectors had been on site for two days and had assessed casework relating to children identified as Children in Need and or who were on a Child Protection Plans. Officers highlighted a number of assessed outcomes of the focused visit:
- The CFS now has dedicated scrutiny of service improvement by Senior Management;
  - There was a strong local understanding of the needs of young people and their families, and that assessments and plans were strong with improved management oversight of casework;
  - Practitioners worked hard to know young people and had strong and positive relationships with them and their families;
  - There was a good understanding of needs and application of care thresholds, and care plans were proportionate and helped to keep children safe.
- 4.6 There were a number of service areas highlighted for improvement which included:
- Quality of written records;
  - Accessibility of case records and management systems, particularly access to historical records.
- 4.7 Children and Families Service (CFS) had developed a response to the outcomes of the focused visit which were detailed in the attached report. These would eventually be merged with an updated Children's Social Care Action Plan. Key actions highlighted within the report included:
- In respect of the quality of written records, a new Child Summary has been developed to sit at the front of case records to provide a condensed case history together with statements from the voice of young people. This had been recently rolled out across the service.
  - The cyberattack had necessitated the service to develop an interim children's social care database whilst record management data was being recovered. Whilst it was recognised that the establishment of the interim system was a significant achievement in the timeframe, it was not as accessible or user friendly as the previous system and did not provide the reporting functions which management needed.
  - Additional guidance had also been developed to help improve the quality of written records. Similarly, work was commencing on improving the simplicity and accessibility of children's social care plans.

**7.20 pm: Four members of the Commission were now present and the meeting was therefore quorate.**

Questions from the Commission

4.8 In respect of required developments to improve the voice of the child, is the issue related to practitioners not collecting such data or not recording it? Also, what improvements in recording the voice of the child have been seen as a result of new guidance and systems described in the presentation and report? How are Hackney Tomorrow involved in developing the voice of young people in social care?

- The issue identified by Ofsted was that practitioners fully and positively engaged with young people during their visits and fully reflected this in subsequent case notes. However, the voice of the young person is edited or diluted in subsequent social care plans and/or iterations of those plans. Therefore, at the end of the process it is difficult to determine the views or wishes initially expressed by the child. It was also noted in the Ofsted report that the views of children were not always consistently recorded at the outset and this should be improved.
- Children do attend child protection conferences and this is a very meaningful and powerful way in which children are engaged in decisions about them and the care that they receive.
- Hackney Tomorrow was noted to have done some excellent work to support CFS, in particular its approach to Looked After Children Reviews.

Action: The Commission noted that where possible it would like the inclusion of the voice of the child reflected in reports it receives.

4.9 Following the impact of the cyberattack, what improvements have been made in relation to record keeping. To what extent will the current records management system and difficulty accessing case histories be a barrier to positive outcomes for future Ofsted inspections, that is, is this likely to be an ongoing problem or something that will be resolved shortly?

- The effect of the cyber attack is a considerable challenge for the service and until there is a record system in place which is fit for purpose, this will affect the outcome of any graded assessment by Ofsted. The current system does not have the functionality to give Ofsted the information that it needs in the timescale required for them to undertake the inspection. CFS is working closely with in-house IT teams and external software manufacturers to improve local systems. The Group Director was also meeting with officials at both Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE) to work out the next steps for the organisation. It was noted that there were major decisions ahead, not only in relation to access case records systems across Education as well as children's social care, but also for adult social care.
- There is a system in place where practitioners can write down and record notes from their visits (and from partner visits) but this is an interim system and it does not have the functionality of previous systems (MOSAIC), e.g. searches, performance or data retrieval. This is a significant issue for the Council and whilst Ofsted were sympathetic to the situation, the Council recognised that it had to move at pace to restore a viable and compliant records system as soon as possible.

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4.10 Aside from improved records management, what are the key milestones for the CFS to reach its ambitions for the service to be inspected as 'good' and then on to 'outstanding' service?

- The CFS is now keenly aware of what it must do to move to good and onto outstanding practice, and there are a number of work streams supporting this process. Following on from this, the key aim will be to ensure that there is consistency in the application of improved social work practice. It was also acknowledged that there would be a need to amalgamate the outcomes and action from respective inspection into one development plan for the service, which could be monitored and reviewed.

4.11 To what extent does the limitations of the record system have in terms of risks for CFS?

- Although reporting was limited at the moment because of the recording system, officers were confident that they were not missing anything; officers were aware of all looked after children, where they were and what support they were getting. There was also a full record of all meetings (including with partners) held in supporting children in care or being supported by the service. Once a new record system was decided upon, the service would then begin to migrate existing information across.

4.12 How are managers assessing what staff feel about recent changes made to social work practice? What are the key areas of feedback that staff have provided and what changes have been made as a result?

- Staff have responded well to new patterns of service delivery. There were some initial concerns about morale of staff, but there is now a marked improvement. Staff from across the service have been positive about the outcomes of the focused visit and that Ofsted recognised the hard work of staff in making service adaptations and improvements. Staff were buoyant and ready for the ongoing challenge of development and improvement.
- There is also a rich forward plan in terms of communication and engagement with staff and a number of livestream engagement events with all staff had already been undertaken or were planned. As new senior staff in the organisation both the Group Director and Director had undertaken preliminary meetings with staff which helped 'temperature check' how staff were feeling.
- In terms of pace and new developments, these issues will be ever-present in the organisation as this was part of the continuum of improvement. It was also noted that staff were now spending a lot more time together physically, and that working in small teams again had had a positive impact on morale.
- The Cabinet member also noted that they had undertaken floor walking exercises with the Director and reported that staff felt more comfortable in reporting issues of concerns and were confident that action would be taken.
- Regular staff surveys are undertaken across the whole service and the most recent one undertaken in July was positive with staff reporting that they had a sense of autonomy in their work and that management was supportive. There were some key areas of learning for CFS from this survey which centred on the need to improve in support to staff through the process and pace of change. Wellbeing was also an area identified by staff which was also being addressed by the service.

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- 4.13 Is there a timeframe for the next full inspection of children's social care services by Ofsted?
- In recent conversations with regional officers at HMI Education, it was suggested that Ofsted would return for a further focused visit within 12 months and that a full graded (ILAC) inspection would follow sometime thereafter.
  - CFS is ambitious and a development plan is currently being drafted which not only encompassed how the service would respond to Ofsted outcomes, but broader service wide improvements.

- 4.14 The Chair thanked officers for attending the meeting for this item and responding to questions from the Commission. The Chair acknowledged that staff had faced many difficult issues over the past months and whilst that ongoing issues pertaining to the recording system were clearly hampering progress, it was hoped that these could be resolved soon to better support staff and ensure children and young people continue to receive a good service. The Commission would continue to maintain oversight of the Ofsted Action Plan once this was updated.

### 5. Youth Justice Service

- 5.1 In July 2021, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) undertook a themed inspection across 9 different Youth Justice Services, including Hackney. This item was planned as an opportunity for the Commission to consider the outcomes of this inspection and how local services have responded. The report was not published as planned (on 4/10/21) and therefore the Youth Justice Service provided a short briefing for members in advance of the meeting which provides useful contextual information about the service.

- 5.2 The HMIP inspection report is expected to be published on 21st October 2021 and will be circulated to the Commission thereafter. It was agreed that should any lines of enquiry be developed from the report, that the Commission would present these to officers and their responses published in a future agenda to note.

Agreed: HMIP inspection report to be distributed to the Commission when published, and any questions arising from that report to be submitted to officers, with a response published in a later agenda.

#### Youth Justice Service

- 5.3 It was noted that Hackney was selected to be part of the HMI probation inspection not because the borough was perceived to be a problem, but because of the diversity of the resident communities. The thematic inspection focused on the disproportionate outcomes of youth justice, issues to which the service was already alert. As an organisation, the service was beginning to analyse and understand what might be improved for such young people earlier on in their life pathways which might have prevented them from entering the youth justice system. In Hackney, this narrative was rightly focussed on black Caribbean and mixed heritage boys and how supporting bodies can intervene earlier and more effectively to address their needs.
- 5.4 Fewer than 1 in 100 children and young people aged 10-17 were involved (either formally or informally) in the criminal justice systems locally, meaning that 99% of local young people were therefore doing well in difficult and challenging times. Of the 1% of young people who are in the local criminal justice system, there is an over



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representation of black Caribbean boys. When considering serious crimes and those which end in a custodial sentence, the over representation of black Caribbean boys in this cohort is exacerbated further still: at times over 90-95% of those young people detained by the state locally have been from black or mixed heritage families.

- 5.5 There are however, low numbers of young people in Hackney who are first time entrants into the Youth Justice System (YJS). There have been fewer than 100 first time entrants to the YJS in Hackney for each of the past 5 years, and most recently (2020) there were just 79. Also, for informal out of court disposals, 82% of these young people did not come back into the YJS. In terms of re-offending, which is an important measure in youth justice, the re-offences per offender ratio is lower than many of the neighbouring 'family' of boroughs who have similar demographic profiles.
- 5.6 There are areas where the service would like to perform better, particularly in relation to education, employment and training (EET) as it is widely understood that education is a protective factor for many children in preventing them from entering the YJS. Whilst Hackney does achieve well locally with 69% of young people in EET at the end of an order, the YJS would like to do better and has an aim to reach 80%.
- 5.7 The other area of concern locally was the high levels of violence and use of weapons within local youth offending. Again, the same ethnic disproportionalities are evident in this specific cohort.
- 5.8 The YJS does achieve good outcomes for children and young people it supports. This was attributed to the the approach that the service adopted which incorporated the following principles:
- 'Child first, offender second' approach, recognising that all these young people are all under the age of 18;
  - Trauma informed approach - recognising that children and young people require support for emotional development;
  - Young offenders are not treated as 'mini adults' and that there is a real effort on behalf of staff to understand the narrative of young people and their family and to project this to the court;
  - A recognition that unmet needs are a common denominator for this group of young people where there is a high incidence of abuse, neglect and other harms and where many have educational or other learning needs.
- 5.9 A key aim of the YJS workers is to help these young people build, develop and maintain supportive relationships with adults. This is challenging because the YJS is an agent of the state, and many local young people across different communities have a strong distrust of law enforcement and other governmental bodies. Staff do not condone behaviour but encourage young people to reflect, learn and look forward to the future.

### Questions from the Commission

- 5.10 There is a growing body of evidence, both national (Lammy Report) and local (Account Report) which indicates that young black boys are treated differently within local law enforcement and criminal justice systems. How is the service addressing these disproportionalities locally within the CJS?

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- One of the most important aspects of this work data is data analysis, and the ability to be able to track and explain. The service has data which shows such disproportionality and is seeking explanations from partner agencies. For example, the YJS invited police to review 20-30 'stop and searches' that took place in Hackney, and where improvements were identified this informed the provision of further advice and training within the organisation. The YJS is also reviewing 'red dot' stops and use of tasers on young people with the police at an upcoming meeting.
- On a day-to-day level staff in the YJS work with the lived experience of the young people that they support, and ensure that young people and their families know how to respond to repeated stop and searches and are encouraged to use the Independent Office of Police Complaints. There is also an advocacy role to ensure that young people have a voice and their views are heard in YJ proceedings and to bring challenge to the justice system and other legal processes.

5.11 Adultification is where young people are perceived to be more mature (e.g. less innocent, more sexually aware) than their actual age, which leads to young people being viewed and treated as adults and particularly affects black and other minority ethnic communities. What is the local YJS doing to address adultification?

- Evidence from Middlesex University which has assessed young people's access and engagement with local youth justice provision found that there was no statistically significant difference among different ethnic groups accessing support services in Hackney which was encouraging. Notwithstanding this, the YJS acknowledges that there are issues with adultification and that this is issue really grounded in racial and ethnic bias and discrimination. Problems with adultification were most keenly felt in the post court stages of the YJ system in relation to courts, sentencing and defence solicitors.
- It was noted that adultification was also structural with young people treated as adults in Home Office and Ministry of Justice policy positions, for example the Domestic Abuse Act which treats 16 year olds as adults.
- It was also noted that the Education and Children Services Directorate was developing an Anti- Racist Action Plan which would address adultification in the wider adolescent population as well as young offenders.

5.12 Hackney Youth Parliament Question: How is the YJS helping to improve trust between local young people and the police?

- The YJS is a multi-agency partnership and the Head of Service manages a wide range of officers including police, SLT, Education as well as Youth Justice officers. All these officers are subject to the same oversight and training in their approaches to young offenders which includes (seeking the child at the centre and offending as part of a wider system, trauma informed approach, emotional intelligence and coaching; effective, evidence based practice). It is hoped that this approach and understanding of youth offending is similarly adopted and utilised by police officers when they return to other duties within the force.
- Senior officers within the Council would, with the assistance of local data and records, hold the police to account for their actions. For example, there was a



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stop and search survey, and those officers which did poorly within this were given further advice and additional training.

- The Head of YJS also raised this issue with senior police officers, both locally and nationally, noting that young people in London were policed more aggressively and that much more should be done to engage young people. Whilst the police have improved communication and engagement with adults, further improvement was required in their engagement with young people.

5.13 As improved partnership working at both a governance level and operational level has been previously highlighted as an area for improvement, what progress has been made in this respect? In particular, to what degree is there a shared understanding and approach to key local issues such as safeguarding and adultification?

- In terms of partnership, the CHSCP will have some oversight of the work and will play a role in signing off the annual report. It is now widely understood that education helps to keep young people safe, and that keeping young people engaged in education and training is a key safeguarding issue for all services. There is good linkage between those boards which have oversight of those children which offend and who are in need of safeguarding support.
- Any disproportionalities that arise in the cohort of young people that offend, be it in terms of race, gender, or undiagnosed need, is an indication that earlier intervention is needed on behalf of the collective of local services.

5.14 How does the service plan to involve the voice and lived experiences of young people in local policy and practice? How does the YJS work within the local community such as local youth groups to ensure that the voice of young people is heard?

- It was acknowledged that this was not currently one of the strongest areas of the YJS work. It is clear that young people do have a mistrust of local law enforcement and youth justice services, which is a barrier for developing engagement and involvement of young people in service development and improvement. The YJS is clear that this was a community safety issue and that it would be seeking to engage young people who have experience of the local criminal justice system for their feedback on the services provided to support them. The YJS service was planning to support this engagement through accredited learning and or provision of fair wage for their time and input.

5.15 Other work undertaken locally would suggest that undiagnosed SEND or other additional needs is associated with youth offending? How significant is this issue among the local cohort of young offenders?

- From a local perspective, 6 out of 10 young offenders have an undiagnosed /unmet need particularly centering on speech, language and communication difficulties. All materials used within the service to engage and support young people have been developed in consultation with SLT service. The service also tried to avoid the jargon of youth justice and other public service, so young people can better understand the process.

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- 5.16 In relation to unmet needs of young people, how is this understanding communicated and shared with local partners, for example, the police in stop and search processes?
- Whilst the Head of Service does raise the issue of unmet needs (poor education engagement and attainment, physical & sexual abuse, loss and bereavement, experience of crime as victims) at strategic partnership board meetings, this remained a valid and live issue.
- 5.17 How does the service ensure that the language used in supporting children and young people in the CJS does not exacerbate or compound the disadvantage that different groups young people experience?
- Race continues to be a significant narrative in the youth justice systems and the disproportionate impact that this has with children and young people of Black and mixed heritage communities. The HMI Probation report on disproportionality will undoubtedly make for a sobering read when it is published in (21/10/21) and this will emphasise the need for local services to work in partnership to be more assertive in their support for young people at an early stage.
- 5.18 Given that young people can come into contact with the criminal justice system at an age as early as 10 years old, and that records of their involvement may remain on the system for a considerable period of time, what is the YJS doing to support local young offenders in helping young people to move on and forward with their life?
- It was noted that informal disposals do not create a criminal record for young people. Further still, a recent ruling by the Supreme Court now means that a pre-court disposal (Youth Caution and Conditional Caution, Community Resolution) is now spent upon completion and young people do not have to disclose this in the future. This gives young people the opportunity to leave adolescent offending behind.
  - Scotland has moved the age of responsibility for criminal behaviour to 12 years whereas in England this remains at 10 years. Whilst the local service may be in favour of such a move, this was of course in the control of the MoJ.
- 5.19 Although only 10-15% of people on the local gangs matrix are young people, given that these young people are children, should they actually be on this matrix and how are local services supporting them?
- The YJS works hard to ensure that only those young people who are on the gangs matrix are those who are embedded within local gangs and actively engaged with serious violence.
  - Previously young people who were being sexually exploited were referred to as child prostitutes, and there has been a similar paradigm shift with those young people involved in gangs and associated gang cultures, where there is now a greater recognition that these young people may be criminally exploited. Thus young people for whom there is grave concern and who may appear on the gang matrix are increasingly viewed through a safeguarding lens.
- 5.20 Given that Tower Hamlets has lower numbers of young people who have been permanently excluded and Hackney shares a borough Command with Tower Hamlets, the Commission enquired if comparative data was available for the number

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of First Time Entrants (FTE) into the YJS and the youth reoffending rate per offender?

- Officers noted that they did not have this data to hand but would make enquiries at TH and pass this data back to the Commission.

Action: To provide the Commission with data from Tower Hamlets on FTE into the YJS and the youth reoffending rate per offender.

- 5.21 The Chair summed up the item by reiterating how important it has been for the Commission to maintain oversight of this area. Questioning within the session highlighted similar patterns of ethnic disproportionalities in the YJS data to what are recorded for other policy areas, such as school exclusion. The Commission would review the HMI Probation inspection report when its published and forward questions on to the service. On the evidence presented and subsequent discussions with officers, the Commission would also review whether it would be beneficial to revisit this area again within the next work programme.
- 5.22 The Chair thanked officers for their reports and for attending the meeting and responding to questions from the Commission.

### **6. Early Years Strategy and Reconfiguration of Children's Centres**

[Following an earlier declaration of interest, Salmah Kansara excused herself from this item.]

- 6.1 Further to the confirmation of the Early Years Strategy at Cabinet, a consultation on the reconfiguration of Children's Centres was launched on 15th September 2021. The Commission is being consulted as part of that consultation which closes on 16th November 2021. Officers presented a number of supporting documents which included:
- Early Years Strategy Cabinet Report;
  - Early Years Strategy
  - Consultation Strategy
  - Consultation Questionnaire.

#### Early Years Service

- 6.2 The Group Director introduced the item noting the following:
- The Early Years Strategy (EYS), which was grounded in sound evidence base, aimed to ensure that services worked strategically to give young people the best start in life;
  - The EYS will respond to the wide ranging impact that the pandemic has had upon young people and their families.
  - The Consultation sets out a proposal for the reconfiguration of children's centres which is an approach which will lead to financial savings to improve the Council's financial position.
  - The reconfiguration aims to limit the impact that this will have on young people as proposals are about service reach as opposed to physical buildings.
- 6.3 The Cabinet Member for Families, Early Years, Parks & Play thanked officers for the development of the EYS. The Cabinet member noted the following:

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- That a number of engagement exercises had been undertaken to support the development of the EYS including a user survey of parents. Members were also consulted through the Health & Wellbeing Board, Member Oversight Board and a dedicated member drop-in.
- Community feedback from the survey of parents noted the importance of integrated services that children centres offer as well as access to universal facilities such as stay and play. It is hoped that the EYS will protect these but it was noted however that the merging of services into the future.
- The vacancy rate for childcare had been growing in nurseries and some children's centres, and there was a wider regional trend of falling rolls across reception age children.
- It was acknowledged that there was a savings context for the EYS as the Council needed to respond to funding pressures not only as a result of declining central government funding, but also due to additional pressures arising from the pandemic and the cyberattack. The Council had been forced to look at discretionary spending, which includes children's centres, as this service is almost exclusively resourced through discretionary funding.
- As a consequence it had been necessary to make savings within the children centre network through the proposed closure of two children's centres. It is important that this is done strategically and in a planned way to minimise impact. In addition, the EYS will see the development of:
  - Six Family Hubs for children (aged 0-19) and their families;
  - Two Early Years Hubs for children with complex needs;
  - Further integration of EY and Health Visiting services.

### 6.4 The Head of Early Years and Early Help also outlined the main changes set out in the EYS and the consultation process:

- The consultation on the EYS and the reconfiguration of children's centres was launched on 15th September 2021 and would run until 16th November.
- It is acknowledged that the closure of two children's centres is a contentious part of this wider service reconfiguration and that the consultation would give affected families an opportunity to contribute and respond.
- The EY service was holding meetings with families who will be directly affected by the planned closures and these would provide an opportunity for the service to set out the rationale for the closures and for parents to respond.
- Both children's centres proposed for closure were in Cazenove Ward which whilst an area of significant growth, demand was centred in the independent sector rather than mainstream settings.
- At the time of the meeting there were in excess of 500 childcare vacancies across Hackney, and a number of local primary settings were reducing the number of forms for school entry.
- The impact of covid on young children has been well documented with young people presenting with significant gaps in social, emotional and educational development. Similarly, the pandemic had impacted on the takeup of the 2 year-old free childcare entitlement for vulnerable children.
- Whilst it was acknowledged that the reconfiguration would mean taking some services away, this would enable the service to focus on those groups who may have been underserved in the past (e.g. children with additional or special educational needs). The EYS was therefore an opportunity to refocus

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local efforts and to target those most in need of support and tackle disproportionalities in the service.

### Questions from the Commission

- 6.5 Both the proposed closures are located in the north of the borough. What impact will the closure have on other surrounding children's centres and nurseries? Do they have sufficient capacity to pick up additional demand? How will service users of children's centres proposed for closure be supported to transfer across to other services?
- There are 4 children's centres within 10 minutes walk of each other. Whilst this is an area of high growth, this growth is focused within the independent sector. There will still be a need for the drop-in and the stay and play services and there will still be capacity in the sector to deliver to this need after the closures.
  - It was noted that even with these closures there will still be three other centres in close proximity which are all well used by parents.
  - The Cabinet member also sought to reassure the Commission that in a previous closure of a children centre, the service has worked well with affected families and helped them move to other nearby centres.
- 6.6 What is the total savings that will be realised from the closure of the two children's centres and what additional investments will be necessary to support the wider development of the EYS (e.g. Family Hubs)?
- There is no additional new money and proposals for Family Hubs and Early Years Centres for additional needs will be developed from existing resources across services supporting children and young people.
  - It is estimated that the cost savings from the closure of the two children's centres will be approximately £1.2m, though it was emphasised that the costs of children's centres were rising year on year (e.g. salaries, catering, resources).
  - The only way to fund increased costs of children's centres with no additional funding would be to increase childcare fees. The new fees structure introduced in 2019 reduced the subsidy to higher income families to enable support for lower income families to be increased. Whilst £500k of savings were released in year 1 (of 2 year plan), the second part of the programme was not applied because of Covid and the anticipated savings (£500k) were not possible. Therefore the additional savings from the children centre closure will help offset this shortfall.
  - Health partners will not bring new money into the service, though they will bring new opportunities in the form of new and improved ways of working to better support the holistic needs of children and their families.
- 6.7 Since the pandemic, families have been accessing less childcare and in different ways. Does the service not expect that the way that families access services will change once again once the pandemic is over. Is the service making decisions about the service based on current patterns of usage which may not be representative?
- The Council has had to make savings and the EY service has been given a savings target as part of this wider programme of savings.

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- There has been widespread change in the pattern of parental takeup of childcare, with parents focusing usage within 15 and 30 free childcare entitlement and less use of wrap-around services.
- Whilst the local birth rate and the number of births at the Homerton (circa 4,000 to women resident in Hackney) has remained broadly static, there has been an increase in births among the Orthodox Jewish Community.
- There are a number of transitions in the early years sector which are taking place, not all of which are attributable to Covid. There have also been changes in overall vacancy rates.
- The Group Director noted that even whilst this was a painful decision and not without impact, and even if two children centres closed, there would still be 18 children's centres remaining in Hackney which was substantially higher than other neighbouring boroughs. It was important not to focus on the buildings but on the services that are available locally, and that the new proposals set out in the EYS would help local services to reach more young people and their families.
- The proposals put forward in the strategy were centred on sustainability of future provision and these proposals to close children's centres have been reluctantly put forward.

6.8 Whilst the service has indicated that this was a strategic review across the whole children centre network, what assurance can be provided for the financial viability of the remaining 18 children's centres and that further closures would not be necessary in the near future?

- The Cabinet member would have liked to offer more confidence on this, but the service was in a vulnerable position financially. The Cabinet member was confident that the service would respond to closures by ensuring vulnerable families were supported, for example, ensuring that vulnerable two-year-olds entitled to free 15 hours of child care continued to access their entitlements.
- The Cabinet member was confident that the right decision had been taken on the proposed closure of the specific centres. The other 18 services were secure, and these centres would not be 'hollowed out' but continue to provide an integrated range of services. The service had to focus on the remaining 18 centres to ensure that staff morale is not impacted.

6.9 The Cabinet report (at 6.4.1) states that the Early Years Strategy presents an opportunity for integrated funding for local health and education support services. Will the Early Years Strategy provide an opportunity to lever in additional funding to support shared early years ambitions and priorities with our partners?

- The Early Help Review (EHR) and Early Years strategy are interlinked, and the former will be brought to scrutiny at a future date (November 1st). The EHR has reviewed the early help offer provided by different services across Hackney Council (e.g. Children Centre, Young Hackney and Children and Families). The EHR will help develop a more coherent early help offer from the council, and further work will then be undertaken with the wider partnership to build wider buy-in and support.

6.10 How will the Early Years Strategy synchronise with other key council strategies such as the Community Strategy, and the upcoming Early Help Strategy? How does the



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geographical fit of Children's Centres and other early years services correlate with neighbourhood areas developed by the local CCG?

- The key part of the EYS is about greater integration and working more closely with colleagues in Public Health and in the Homerton Hospital who deliver the Health Visiting service. HV and children's centres are working with the same children and the same sets of parents to deliver shared priorities. Thus closer working relationships would hopefully mean better access to shared data and the ability to target parents in need and to deliver interventions earlier. The HV service will be redesigned for the end of the current contract in 2023 to reflect these shared ambitions and objectives.
- There are 6 children centre clusters and 8 neighbourhood areas. The early years team were working closely with neighbourhood areas to improve communication and partnership with adult teams (e.g. recognising where children may be present in the way that adult services may be provided and vice versa). Early analysis was positive that bridges were being developed between early years and adult services. There were 8 neighbourhood areas as these related to the number of patients in a specific area and would not correspond to 6 cluster areas. It is hoped that further work with neighbourhoods will bring improvements with the way that early years connects with GP's and wider family of services (e.g. Midwives).

6.11 Can further details be provided on funding for Family Hubs?

- In terms of funding for the Family Hubs, these financial figures for these were not to hand at the meeting, but it was emphasised that there was no new funding for this new development.

6.12 Will the SEND hubs developed in the north and south of the borough be funded through the High Needs Block?

- Yes. The intention is that this will support SEND and Early Years working together more effectively to better support children and young people.

6.13 The Chair thanked officers for attending and responding to questions from members of the Commission. As noted earlier, the Commission would develop a response to the consultation and formally respond before this closed on 16th November 2021.

Agreed: The Commission to develop a formal response to the consultation and submit this by 16th November.

## 7. Work Programme

7.1 The latest version of the work programme was presented to the Commission. A number of updates were highlighted which included:

- Early Help Review to be taken on November 1st;
- School Estates Strategy to be taken on November 1st;
- School Improvement Partners role in closing the attainment gap;
- Parental engagement and support in schools.

7.2 The Commission was finalising off the scope for its prospective review for this year which was focusing on adolescents entering care. This would be shared with senior officers and members of the Commission for their views and input.

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7.3 At the 6th December meeting it was noted that it is Cabine Q & A with Cllr Woodley. The Chair requested that members put forward suggestions for specific policy areas to focus on.

7.4 The work programme was evolving and would aim to address key themes arising from the consultative process.

### **8. Minutes**

8.1 The minutes of the last meeting held on 12th July 2021 were discussed by the Commission.

8.2 There were a number of actions from that meeting on the 12th July 2021 which included requests for further data from the Children and Families Service on:

- Children placed in residential care;
- Children placed in semi-independent care.
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8.3 This data was provided by Children and Families Service and included in the minutes. It was noted that this data provided a helpful understanding of both the successes and challenges of supporting children in these different residential home settings and would be useful for the Commission in its work on adolescents entering care and housing options for children leaving care.

### **9. Any other business**

The date of the next meeting is at 7pm on 1st November 2021

**Meeting closed at 9.30pm**