

Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission Minutes of 2nd November

Attendees

Sophie Conway (Councillor) (Chair)
Margaret Gordon (Councillor) (Vice Chair)
Ajay Chauhan (Councillor)
Humaira Garasia (Councillor)
James Peters (Councillor)
Clare Potter (Councillor)
Sharon Patrick (Councillor)
Katie Hansen (Councillor)
Sade Etti (Councillor)
Luisa Dornelas (Statutory Co-optee)
Shabnum Hassan (Statutory Co-optee)
Ernell Watson (Co-opted member)
Jo Macleod (Co-opted member)

In attendance:

- Cllr Anntionette Bramble, Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Children's Social Care
- Cllr Caroline Woodley, Cabinet Member for Early Years, Families and Play
- Anne Canning, Group Director, Children and Education
- Annie Gammon, Head of Hackney Learning Trust and Director of Education
- Eleanor Schooling, Independent Chair, Hackney Schools Group Board
- Lisa Aldridge, Head of Safeguarding & Learning Service
- Huw Bevan, Head of Family Intervention & Support Service
- Harriet Okot, Communications Officer
- Yusuf Erol, Head of Finance, Education Service

Cllr Conway in the Chair

1. Apologies for absence

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from:

- Cllr Clare Joseph
- Justine McDonald (Statutory Co-optee)
- Michael Lobenstein (Co-opted member)
- Shuja Shaikh (Co-opted member)

2. Urgent Items / Order of Business

2.1 An urgent update on the impact of Covid 19 on local schools was requested for the meeting. The update and discussion is reported at item 13.

2.2 The Chair noted that Rev Graham Hunter has resigned as a member and wished to formally thank him for his support and for his work for the Commission over the past 3 years.

2.3 Similarly, the Chair expressed thanks to Sarah Wright who had left the Council after 14 years, most recently in her role of the Director of Children and

Families Service. On behalf of the Commission, the Chair thanked Sarah for all her work in children's services in Hackney and her support for the work of this Commission.

3. Declarations of interest

3.1 Cllr Conway (Chair), Cllr Gordon (Vice Chair) and Cllr Patrick declared that they would excuse themselves from the meeting for item 7 given their role on the Children's Member Oversight Board which was overseeing improvements in children's social care arising from recent Ofsted inspections. In this context, a new Chair would be elected for Item 7 - the Ofsted Inspection Action Plan.

3.2 In addition to the above, the following declarations were received by members of the Commission:

- Cllr Peters was a governor at a special school in Hackney;
- Cllr Chauhan was a member of NEU and a teacher at a school outside of Hackney;
- Jo Macleod was a governor at a school in Hackney;
- Luisa Dornelas was a governor at a school in Hackney;
- Shabnum Hassan was a governor at a school in Hackney.

4. Hackney Schools Group Board

4.1 The Independent Chair of Hackney Schools Group Board (HSGB) introduced this item, highlighting the following:

- The HSGB was established in 2019 as an independent advisory body to champion education excellence and to promote inclusion and belonging among local children.
- A workshop among local leaders had established three initial priorities for the HSGB which were; Belonging for All, Leading for the Curriculum and Reading for All.
- The HSGB produced two research studies led by Professor Katherine Riley during 2020, the first supporting school leadership during the pandemic and the second to facilitate parental discussions and engagement on race in local schools. The former of these studies supported sessions for 6 local head teachers to explore aspects of their leadership in their response to lockdown and the implications of school closures.
- In relation to race, the HSGB organised focus groups with parents at 6 local schools. Analysis revealed broad support for these schools in their approach to race and their exploration of cross-cultural issues. Concerns remained however in respect of black leadership in schools and the need to decolonise the curriculum. The research also suggested that schools helped to create a 'level playing field' in which children and parents of different races and cultures could engage and interact more equally than in other settings. It was also apparent that schools were beginning to reflect on the impact of their policies and procedures and whether these impacted on all children equally. The HSGB would follow up this research with additional work on policy implementation in schools.

4.2 The Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Children's Social Care noted that there is a strong family of schools in Hackney which would be preserved through the HSGB. The engagement and involvement of local schools would help to bring this initiative to life, and the HSGB had already begun to demonstrate the positive impact of its work within local schools.

Questions from the Commission

4.3 What proportion of local schools are actively engaged and involved in the work of the HSGB? Are Academies, Free Schools and Independent Schools actively engaged?

- The parental engagement project involved a wide range of schools including Academies and Free Schools and spanned both primary and secondary sectors. This would be the model that the HSGB would like to replicate throughout its work as it was really valuable to have such a wide cross-section of school involvement.
- It was also noted that there was diversity on the HSGB itself where there were Independent members who were from both local Academies and local school federations.

4.4 How does the HSGB intend to share new learning and improvements across the schools in Hackney? How many schools will be engaging with the research and development projects of the HSGB and making improvements?

- There were 6 schools working on leadership in the pandemic, 6 schools working on the parental engagement and race project and a further two groups of 6 schools were working with HSGB in other areas (e.g. policy development). Therefore 24 local schools were currently working with the work of the HSGB. The findings from the projects will be disseminated to all local schools, and a session will be held for all head teachers in 2021 to help share learning from these projects. The Independent Chair also engaged regularly with local head teachers through local school forums to promote the project outcomes identified by the HSGB

4.5 How does the HSGB capture the voice of teachers for their perspectives of race and the curriculum?

- Each school that participated in the project which engaged parents to talk about race had been asked to set out the practical improvements that they intend to make as a result of their participation. Each school will then share this learning and the positive developments that they had made in their school with other schools across Hackney. The most important aspect of this work would be the degree to which its outcomes inform local school policies and the impact on day to day teaching in the classroom.

4.6 How were the three priorities of the HSGB determined?

- The HSGB held an away day with the Board members which looked at the results of all local schools to identify what issues would be of real value. Reading was identified to be a key issue in the most recent set of results and naturally this formed one local priority. The changes to the Ofsted inspection framework had necessitated schools to re-examine their

curriculum, so it was felt that the HSGB could add value to local schools work in this respect.

4.7 In relation to the HSGB priority to design an effective curriculum, what attention was being given to the needs of children with SEND and their limited access to cultural capital?

- The HSGB felt that further work is needed to help develop cultural capital for all children, including those children with SEND. The HSGB does have a focus on belonging for all, though it was early days to assess the impact and more focused work was expected around SEND policies early in 2021.

4.8 Are Alternative Providers engaged with and being supported by HSGB?

- While the HSGB was there to engage with all education providers, as yet it had had very little involvement from Alternative Providers (AP). The HSGB had however spoken to a number of parents whose children attended AP. This was an area for further development.

4.9 There are concerns around the accountability of local schools to parents and to the local community. What work can the HSGB do to tackle this issue?

- The HSGB regularly reviews the results of all local schools which help to determine local priorities and where the work of the Board can add the most value.

4.10 The Cabinet Member for Early Years, Families and Play noted that the report was timely as the country headed towards a second lockdown as this reiterated the need for a community of learning among schools to adjust and plan for the significant changes that lay ahead.

4.11 The Chair felt that it would be useful to hear from HSGB again in the new Municipal year when work had developed further. The Chair thanked the Independent Chair for attending and updating the Commission on its work.

Agreed: That HSGB update be added to the work programme for 2021/22.

5. Budget Monitoring - Hackney Education Service

5.1 As part of its responsibility for budget monitoring, the Commission requested an in-year financial report from the Education Service. The purpose of the budget monitoring report was to highlight those service areas experiencing financial challenge and those actions being taken to manage financial risks.

5.2 The Director of Education introduced the report and provided the following financial overview.

- The majority of the income that comes into the Education Service is passported on to locally maintained schools (£133m) and to early years providers (£41m).

- The Education Service also received £47m to support high needs students the majority of which is spent on children with an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) in mainstream or independent educational settings.

5.3 The Head of Education Finance also highlighted a number of issues from the submitted report.

- There were a number of exclusions from the report which should be noted.
 - Firstly, the budget information in the report only related to service for which the Education Director is responsible and accountable for therefore does not include capital expenditure in education (e.g. maintaining school buildings).
 - Secondly, the financial position of maintained schools was not included in the report or any financial risks in particular schools.
- The net budget for the Education Service was £25.7m which was covered by four service areas: High Needs, Education Operations, Early Years and School Standards and Performance.
- The cost of SEND provision continues to represent a significant financial challenge to the Education Service. While the budget for high needs was significant (£47.6m), an £8.9m overspend was projected at year end. Data from London Councils would suggest that this financial position is similar across many other London boroughs.
- The authority participates regularly across borough lobbying for increased funding and the Cabinet Member for Early Years, Families and Play was in touch with ministers to keep them informed of the service situation in Hackney. The SEND team was also looking for ways to reduce costs, in particular, increasing the availability of in-borough provision which would be more cost effective than out of borough provision.

Questions from the Commission

5.4 Can further details be provided on the identified savings within the SEND budget, and how in-borough provision is intended to be increased? How is the service planning to balance the need to reduce costs for SEND provision when needs and demand for services were increasing?

- It was suggested that there were three main areas where savings may be made over the longer term:
 - A graduated response to EHCP in schools;
 - The development of more in-borough service options to reduce the need for expensive out of borough provision;
 - Promoting more independent travel (where appropriate) to help reduce transport costs.
- Any planned reductions or service changes would involve local stakeholders to ensure that their views are taken into account.
- Given the current levels of funding for SEND services, it was unlikely that Hackney (and other boroughs) would be able to balance this against local needs and costs. An increase in SEND funding from central government would be the only practical solution to meeting the rising levels of demand for SEND services in Hackney and beyond.
- The Cabinet Member for Early Years, Families and Play also noted that:

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- The local SEND strategy was being updated as this expires this year and it would be informed by local data analysis and needs;
- Demand pressures within SEND continued to grow in response to widening of statutory duties to provide services for children with SEND up to 25 years of age and with improved and better diagnoses of needs;
- An additional £4.8m of funding was being allocated by central government next year which, whilst welcome this would not offset the projected cumulative deficit of £13m. The borough was also concerned that that additional funding would come with additional requirements or expectations.
- SEND funding was widely regarded as a national issue with many active parliamentary groups supporting local authorities to lobby for change.
- There were opportunities to develop a multi-borough response to help extend and improve local provision in a more cost effective way.
- Powers were in place to increase provision attached to schools which could be seen in Queensbridge School and was planned for Gainsborough. A new site was planned for The Garden School. It was noted that under current legislation, any new school would have to be a free school or an Academy.

5.5 Given that local schools may need to be compensated by the Education Service for the loss of child care income in the operation of children's centres and one school based children centre has closed, has there been any modelling on the future viability of school based children's centres?

- Budgets for school based children's centres are set by the Education Service . A review is planned of these budgets as it is apparent that these budgets have been tight for a number of years and a balanced solution is required. These schools have also lost income derived from childcare fees during the Covid response which is affecting their financial position. The Council is still in negotiations with central government as to whether this loss of income can be reclaimed as part of the wider local government compensation package for loss of income. The Council is awaiting this decision.
- The Education Service was currently reviewing the Early Years Strategy, though it was clear that Children's Centres would remain a central feature of this strategy.

5.6 The budget deficit for SEND appears to be growing, at which point will this deficit impact on other education services and the overall financial position of the council? What is the worst case scenario?

- Hackney has always been very aware of the cost pressures arising from SEND and very transparent about the nature and level of these pressures this creates for the Council. It was clear that this issue would not be solved until a new funding model with additional funding was developed by central government.

5.7 The Chair noted that it would be helpful to have further information as to whether local SEND provision can be expanded further. The Chair thanked officers for attending and responding to questions from the Commission.

6. Election of Chair (for Item 7)

6.1 In the absence of the Chair and Vice Chair (see 3.1) nominations were taken for the position of Chair for item 7.

6.2 Cllr Peters nominated Cllr Etti who was seconded by Cllr Hansen. As there were no other nominations Cllr Etti was elected as Chair for item 7.

Cllr Sade Etti in the Chair

7.0 Ofsted Inspection Action Plan

7.1 Ofsted inspected the Children and Families Services in Hackney in November of 2019. The outcome of this inspection was that the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers was good, but that the service required improvement in 3 areas:

- 1- Impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families
- 2- Experiences and progress of children who need help and protection
- 3- Overall effectiveness.

7.2 In response, the Children & Families Service drew up an action plan which was submitted to Ofsted in March 2020 and published on Hackney.gov.uk. The Commission therefore sought to assess progress against this action plan.

7.3 The Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Children's Social Care introduced the report.

- The Cabinet member thanked all staff for their response to the Ofsted inspection and the improvements which were being made within the Service.
- A Children's Member Oversight Board was set up to oversee improvements in the Children and Families Service required by Ofsted. The Board meets monthly and is co-chaired by the Mayor and the Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Children's Social Care. The aim of the Board is to interrogate the action plan and provide a robust challenge to ensure that the service is improving. The Board also assisted in how the Children and Families Service adjusted to other issues such as Covid19 and the racial inequalities highlighted by the Black Lives Matter protests.
- The Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Children's Social Care thanked members for their participation and support for Children's Member Oversight Board.

7.4 The Group Director of Children and Education outlined a summary of the progress made to date:

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- The map of different bodies overseeing improvements in the Children and Families Service contained in the Children and Families 2019-20 Annual Report to Members is a governance map and does not refer to a formal decision making process.
- The Children's Action Plan was published in March 2020 and updates on the progress against these objectives will also be published. Two key pieces of work were in progress (1) obtaining further clarity on the service vision (2) developing a wider partnership plan for children's services across Hackney.
- Information sharing among partner agencies was noted to require improvement by Ofsted and work has progressed well to rectify this. This work has been accelerated by Covid-19 where there has been improved partnership-working and communication with the Education Service and other partners.
- Another area requiring improvement was the support provided to children living in neglectful circumstances. Here a new risk assessment process had been developed which highlighted the cumulative risk to children experiencing or at risk of neglect.
- All Private Fostering arrangements had been reviewed since the inspection and a new management information system had been developed.
- There has been much work to improve the timeliness of pre-proceedings work with additional guidance provided to parents, and the Children and Families Service has worked with the Legal Team to develop and improve practice.
- A new protocol had also been developed to support improvement for children not in education (Elective Home Education) and a more robust process had been developed to ensure that children were receiving an appropriate education.
- The service was working to improve management oversight of casework. A 'side by side' initiative had been developed in which managers sit alongside front line case workers to support practice development. A Staff Reference Group had also been established to understand how practice developments were impacting on staff and their practice.

Questions from the Commission

7.5 Noting that many of the actions have been completed, how long will it take for improvements to take effect with practice and when can the service next be expected to be inspected by Ofsted? Is the Children and Families Service on track to meet the ambitions to be good within 2 years and outstanding at the next inspection?

- The impact of the changes will need to be reviewed, but these improvements will take time. It is clear that the Service and Council-wide response to Covid had impacted on delivery and being able to make such assessments. For example, planned improvements to pre-proceedings work have been difficult to achieve and assess given that courts systems have been significantly affected by lockdown.

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- It is difficult to assess when Ofsted will return to re-inspect Hackney as the timelines for inspections have also been impacted by Covid-19. Ofsted were continuing to inspect local authority provision but were not giving an adjudged report in from their visits. A 'conversation' had taken place with Ofsted in the summer to update on progress against the action plan and a further update would take place in December 2020.

7.6 Peer and external reviews are important in developing assurance of satisfactory progress against the action plan. Have these been able to take place given the restrictions posed by Covid? Can more information be provided on what had taken place or what was planned?

- This work was continuing. An external provider had been appointed who had brought external challenge to the service improvement process.
- A programme of external peer review had been developed to complement internal quality assurance programmes. The Children and Families Service was working with both Camden and Islington and both had been invited to quality assure local audit processes. In early 2021, peer auditing would take place where each authority would visit and review casework in each other's children and families services.
- The Children and Families Service were also looking to commission an external review of its quality assurance and audit processes in 2021. In addition, the service would also be working with the City and Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership to review multi-agency working to support casework management.

7.7 What is the explanation for the higher caseloads in Hackney than in other areas. To what extent is the current figure a reflection on recruitment and retention problems? Does the service have an ideal caseload?

- The structure in Hackney, which uses the Unit Model to deliver support, is different from many other authorities and it is difficult to compare average caseloads. A commitment has been made to look at the Unit Model to understand how resources are used to support children's social care in other local authorities. This will help to benchmark local provision and bring greater confidence to the Children and Families Service around caseloads for staff.
- As a result of the Ofsted inspection additional resources have been put into the Children and Families Service and these would be directed to those services where they can best be used. It was acknowledged that caseloads were an issue and that this likely to be a priority for the service.

7.8 In relation to the external provider commissioned to provide assurance on the progress of the service, can you provide further details of how this will work?

- Alistair Gibbons had been appointed to the role of External Assessor and has been working with Children & Families Service for some time. The External Assessor had undertaken visits to various aspects of the service and assessed practice and reported back to management. The External Assessor had also reported back to the Children's Leadership Board on a number of issues and had attended Children's Member Oversight Board.

The authority and the Children & Families Service have appreciated this critical friend role adopted by the External Assessor.

7.9 What aspects of the Ofsted Action Plan have been most challenging to deliver improvements?

- Securing continual improvement for those children experiencing cumulative neglect had been very difficult for the service, as this required careful and balanced judgement as to when issues were escalated and what interventions should take place. Ensuring that timely decisions and actions are taken about children experiencing neglect was, however, a common concern across social work practice. In many cases, children are best cared for in their family environment. It was also noted that family situations were often fluid, sometimes coping and responding well to requirements of the Service but at other times they found this more difficult. Many families were hovering just over and above this threshold where further action may be required. This very issue had been a subject of a service-wide practice development week in the summer.
- Ensuring that partnerships were sharing information and operating effectively was a key challenge for the organisation, particularly when partner agencies have such very different ways of working.
- The Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Children's Social Care noted that it had been a significant challenge for the Children and Families to deliver on the action plan whilst also responding to the challenges presented by Covid-19.

7.10 Covid-19 has clearly impacted on the way that the Children and Families Service works to support local children in need. How have interventions changed to ensure that these remain effective and acceptable to children and families?

- For a number of families and children and young people, virtual contact with the service has been positive and has helped to improve engagement and involvement. Whilst this may not be the case for all families, the challenge for social work practice was to develop a blended approach (using virtual and face to face approaches) which was robust and safe. The challenge was to ensure that virtual interventions were as effective as face to face interventions.
- It should be noted that face to face contact was being maintained for children for whom there was greatest concern. It was clear however, that new opportunities to engage children and families had been presented and where possible these should be preserved.

7.11 In financial terms, what additional investment has been used to support the recommendations of the action plan, and if so, what have these additional resources been used to fund? Has Covid-19 affected these spending plans?

- The additional financial resource had been used for staffing, particularly to increase capacity of middle management support and the delivery of the Children's Action Plan. One of the most significant costs for the Children and Families Service arising through Covid-19 was the number of looked after children that required specialist placements in residential care

settings. These were very significant costs to the service. The Children and Families Service was closely monitoring the financial impact of Covid-19 and detailed records were being kept of additional expenses incurred.

Agreed: Children and Families Service to provide data on the level of additional investment used to support the Ofsted Inspection Action Plan and how these additional resources have been deployed.

7.12 The Chair thanked officers for attending and responding to questions from the Commission.

Cllr Sophie Conway in the Chair

8.0 Children and Families Service Annual Report (2019/20)

8.1 A report on the Children and Families Service is provided twice-yearly to the Commission. The full year activities of the Children and Families Service for the period April 2019 through to March 2020 was submitted to the Commission.

8.2 The Group Director for Children and Education introduced the report and highlighted the following key issues:

- Staff across the service have worked extremely hard over the past 12 months, not only in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, but also in making the necessary changes to improve services in response to the Ofsted inspection in 2019. The Group Director wished to place on record her thanks to all staff within the Children and Families Service.
- Despite both these challenges, the service has managed to provide strong and effective leadership in tackling systemic racism in response to Black Lives Matter movement which will continue to be a significant piece of work going forward.
- A further challenge was the number of children entering care, particularly those from older age groups (aged 14+). Many of these young people have complex and often need specialised support and placements.
- The Virtual School continued to provide good support to the borough's looked after children who had performed very well in this year's exams.
- The Contextual Intervention Unit, the practical application of the Contextual Safeguarding Project, was anticipated to launch shortly.
- Throughout the year, the service had worked with the Young Futures Commission to further develop the voice of young people in service planning and development. This was a very important piece of work which had brought additional challenge to services but had resulted in a positive impact on service delivery.

8.3 The Head of Safeguarding and Learning also noted a number of developments for the Children and Families Service. Most notably, the service had developed an Anti-Racist Action Plan which had three main objectives:

- Inclusive recruitment and aspirational support to Black and other minority ethnic staff;
- Embed anti-racist practice into its work with children and families;

- Promote an anti-racist approach among partner agencies and in the broader community.

8.4 The Head of Family Intervention & Support Service also highlighted a number of priorities which it had been working on over the past 12 months, these included:

- Developing demand management strategies to help deal with increased activity across the service, in particular, working with partners to secure early help and support for local families;
- Working with partners to support early intervention with children and families to help reduce the need for statutory interventions and, to develop consistent approaches to assessments of risk;
- Ensuring that managerial oversight is robust and consistent in supporting casework management, in particular, ensuring that new managers are familiar with service expectations and standards and are well supported.

8.5 The Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Children's Social Care noted the fundamental change of approach of staff in adopting systemic analysis and practice to their work which sought to embody the lived experience of children and family into their work. The Cabinet member also stressed that the data in the Annual Report was from 2019/20 which did not reflect the current new demands on the service generated by Covid-19. Whilst Covid had placed significant pressures on the service, there had been some positive developments, not least the improved coordination and partnership work between the Education Service and the Children and Families Service.

Questions from the Commission

8.6 What is the relationship between use of agency staff and the social worker turnover in the service. Would it not be expected that with a more stable workforce in Hackney there would be less demand for agency staff? How does the use of agency staff in Hackney compare to other boroughs and what is the social worker vacancy rate?

- Historically there has always been a higher level of agency staff which is a result of the demography of the social workers in the borough, which are on the whole younger and where there is a higher rate of maternity leave than in other boroughs. Regional analysis of the social worker workforce demonstrates that Hackney has one of the youngest age profiles in London.
- The service received grants for various services and projects which can only be appointed on a temporary basis. For example monies allocated to the Troubled Families Project and the Contextual Safeguarding Project were not permanent allocations, thus staff were only appointed on a temporary basis.
- The turnover of social workers was very low in Hackney which would appear to suggest that once the service is able to recruit on a permanent basis, staff remain committed to the service.

8.7 As a result of Covid 19, more children and families were spending more time at home. How has this influenced the service's approach to safeguarding children?

- Traditionally social work has always focused on the context of the family home, and the Contextual Safeguarding Project had sought to create an additional layer of safeguarding rather than shift this focus for child safeguarding itself.
- What the service found through lockdown was that the numbers of missing children that were coming to the attention of the service had slightly decreased. This was not to say that there was reduced risk to children in this time, as it was known that there were fewer adults in public spaces and therefore reduced oversight of young people in such spaces. A Detached Outreach team continued to operate throughout the pandemic offering advice and support to children and young people in those environments where they continued to congregate.

8.8 Data from 2019/20 demonstrated significant increases in activity for all measures (referrals, assessments, children on Child Protection Plans, looked after children) across children's social care. In hindsight, to what extent was this increase in activity attributable to changes in policy and practice arising from the outcomes of the Ofsted focused visit?

- The increase in activity which is recorded in the annual report commenced before and at the time of the Ofsted inspection. Despite numerous investigations, the service has not managed to single out any single causal factor or reasoning behind this increase in demand for services. There was no particular association with the Ofsted Inspection.

8.9 Following up on an earlier question in relation to use of agency staff, why can't staff be recruited to Fixed Term Contracts instead of using agency staff which would be much more expensive to employ? Would this not also be the case for maternity leave?

- The Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Children's Social Care noted that this issue had been discussed with service managers. It was noted that arranging maternity cover can take place in a planned way as more notice is available. It should also be noted that investment in training and development for new staff was considerable, irrespective of their working status and required significant resources. Ideally the Council would like to develop a bank of social workers who could be deployed across the Service as needs and resources demanded.
- It was noted that it was difficult to recruit to a Fixed Term Contract (FTC) as there were ample permanent vacancies for social workers across London. A recent advert for a FTC post yielded no applicants.
- It should be noted that the Service benefits from a range of excellent agency staff who make significant contributions to service delivery. Whilst the Service will always need some agency staff, it is hoped that a pool of social workers employed on a permanent basis who can cover recruitment and vacancies which come up on a regular basis.

8.10 It is noted that the Service is undertaking a review of the Unit Model of casework support in Hackney. Can you provide more details about the aim of this review?

- The Unit Model was set up as part of the Reclaiming Social Work approach a number of years ago. It had been asserted that higher caseloads were manageable under the Unit Model given the degree to which administrative support was provided within this model. The service has chosen 6 local authorities to undertake an in-depth analysis of their social work practice e.g. management and leadership, administrative support. This will enable the service to compare structures, workloads and costs. Although this work has started, it has been delayed by Covid-19. When completed, it is hoped that this will provide the service the data it needs to make an informed decision around appropriate caseload size. Ultimately, a higher caseload means that this detracts from the time that social workers can spend with children and families to provide the support that they need.
- The issue of social work caseloads was an issue for other boroughs and some work has commenced at the regional level to help understand what a reasonable caseload might be across London.

8.11 Page 39 of the report shows that the number of court proceedings for care applications increased significantly in 2019/20 to previous years and the rate in Hackney now far exceeds national levels. To what extent is this trend Hackney specific, or part of a London wide trend?

- It was acknowledged that the service's refocus on work around children and neglect and increased management oversight led to an increase in court proceedings. The rate at which care applications are being made now however, was much more in line with other local authorities and statistical neighbours. It should be noted that at the moment, it can be very challenging to conclude court proceedings in the current environment given the difficulty in securing interventions during Covid-19 and court timetables.

8.12 There have been significant demand pressures within this service for a number of years. Can you outline how demand will impact on overall cost pressures for Children and Families Service?

- There is a significant piece of work being undertaken in relation to demand for services, particularly analysing those new cases first entering the system. These cases are rigorously assessed to make sure that they are signposted to appropriate support so that children and families are not routed down any unnecessary social work support or interventions. The Early Help Review and the Edge of Care Review would contribute to a greater understanding of demand and how this can be supported across the local partnership. The aim is to reset the service so that families have the right level of support for their needs which will ultimately help reduce demand and cost pressures within the service, whilst ensuring that families get the help that they need. It should be noted that the outcomes from these projects would be long term.

Agreed: The Commission would like to be kept up to date with both the Early Help Review and the Edge of Care Review. An update to be agreed.

8.13 How does increased levels of poverty resulting from the impact of Covid-19 intersect with the Children and Families Service approach to neglect?

- There has been an increase in children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) which is often used as a proxy indicator of poverty.
- Identifying neglect early is very challenging particularly in the current Covid-19 context when there has been reduced line of sight of children by professionals and other adults. It will take time for children to again develop trusting relationships with teachers and other adults for them to be able to confide in them any situations which are worrying them at home or elsewhere. Much work has been undertaken to help social workers identify neglect, but clearly not as much face-to-face work with children due to restrictions posed by Covid-19. It is clearly more difficult to assess home environments when visits are not face-to-face. It should be noted however, where there are specific concerns, face-to-face visits have been retained. The Service remained alert to the risks and circumstances of where neglect may be developing.

8.14 On page 44 of the report, over half of those leaving care were to 'other' destinations. Can further clarification on the routes out of care?

- Officers did not have information to hand and would provide this at a later date.

Agreed: That the outcomes of young people exiting care would be provided by Children & Families Service.

8.15 There are significant pressures in the Corporate Parenting budget, where Children and Families are currently spending more than twice (£7m) than anticipated (£3.6m) on residential care and the average placement cost for residential care is now £3,600 per week (page 46). Can you explain what type of accommodation is being commissioned for residential care and the needs of young people involved? Is this due to unavailability of other placements types e.g. fostering? What is the service doing to help manage down costs?

- The Edge of Care project is looking at the pathways of children into care to ensure that all appropriate interventions have taken place before a decision is taken to move a child into care. It is clear however that across the country there are not enough suitable placements which means that there is strong demand for such places. This is not to say that the 'market' for this provision is out of the influence of the Children and Families Service, but there should be a more collaborative approach to ensuring that there is sufficient capacity to meet the needs of this group of children in a more settled way, and work was being undertaken at the regional level to this effect.

- It should be noted however, that many children within this cohort of children entering care have complex needs which require specialist help and support, which is naturally very expensive.

8.16 Although data is not in this report, reports to Scrutiny Panel demonstrated that complaints about the Children and Families Service increased significantly in 2019/20 from previous years. In the analysis of these complaints are there any emerging themes and what processes are in place to ensure that the service learns from these complaints?

- Children and Families Service had a clear process through which complaints are tracked, monitored and analysed. Without further reference to the data however, further insight as to the nature of these complaints could not be provided.
- What is clear in the current year is that Covid-19 has restricted the ability of the service to respond to complaints in a timely and efficient manner at present.

Agreed: Children and Families Service to provide further data on the volume and nature of complaints received by the service in 2019/20.

8.17 The Chair thanked officers for attending and responding to questions from the Commission,

9.0 Community Engagement & Involvement

9.1 The Chair and Vice Chair held a round table consultation event with Hackney Community and Voluntary Service in September 2020 to help identify how the Commission could better engage and involve local communities in the scrutiny process.

9.2 The main outcomes from the session were that: points from the round table discussion are:

- Community representatives would prefer site visits as an engagement tool as this offered a first-hand account of issues affecting local children and young people;
- A regular newsletter from the Commission detailing forthcoming meetings and how local communities can be involved would be beneficial;
- Greater promotion of Commission meetings via social media;
- Community groups did not believe that a reference group or other formal meeting would add value and would require time and resource commitments which they did not have.

9.3 The Commission agreed the report and the recommendations for improved community engagement and involvement.

10.0 Off-rolling in Schools

10.1 The Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Children's Social Care response to the Commission recommendations on Off-rolling in schools was noted by the Commission.

11.0 Work Programme

11.1 The work programme for the remainder of the municipal year was presented. The Commission noted that one significant change to the work programme:

- Due to the planned London Mayoral Election, the meeting scheduled for 28th April 2021 will now take place on Tuesday 11th May 2021.

11.2 The work programme was noted and agreed.

12.0 Minutes

12.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 8th September were noted and agreed by the Commission.

12.2 The date of the next meeting was the 7th December 2020.

13.0 Any other Business - Update on Impact of Covid 19 on Schools in Hackney

13.1 At the request of the Chair an urgent update was provided to the Commission on the impact of Covid 19 on local schools by the Director of Education. The Director highlighted the following information:

- Schools had been open throughout the pandemic and had supported local vulnerable children and those children of key workers since March. A phased reopening took place from May onwards with schools with two year groups from both primary and secondary. All pupils returned in the autumn term in September though start dates were staggered to minimise risks.
- Whilst schools made efforts to reduce the risk of Covid transmission at school (social distancing, handwashing and formation of teaching bubbles) it was accepted that this environment would not be risk free. Protective bubbles were restricted to 30 pupils in primary schools and larger groups in secondary to reduce the risk of large numbers of children required to isolate should an infection be detected. Clinically vulnerable staff were protected throughout the year and were able to work from home or given non-contact roles within schools.
- Whilst there had been positive Covid cases among children in the autumn term, the number of children affected was still relatively small. In the week before half-term (mid October) there were over 30,000 children attending schools and early years settings and the attendance rate was 92%.
- During the week before half term, there were 25 positive cases (of a child or adult) which had impacted on ¼ of local schools and where approximately 500 children and adults were required to self-isolate. This equated to about 2% of the local school population.

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- There was a growing recognition that not all children had equal access to resources at home to help them learn, thus there was a strong commitment from the government to keep schools open and ensure that children could continue to learn and develop. This commitment was reaffirmed in plans to reintroduce a national lockdown from 5th November 2020.
- All Hackney Schools are open and Council will continue to support them to do so.

Questions from the Commission

13.2 How much does the authority know about potential in-school transmission of Covid 19 cases? How effective are measures to help local school children and adults working in schools to self isolate?

- Whilst there have been cases where there has been localised transmission within school, these were generally the exception and most notifications revolve around a singular case. A larger cluster of cases would be determined as a localised outbreak at which point PH would be involved to help manage and contain the outbreak.

13.3 If parents assessed that local schools were not safe and decided not to send their children to school, what enforcement approach would the Council take to ensure that children attended?

- There had been an increase in the number of parents who were choosing to electively home educate their child. At this point in 2019, there were 35 children being electively home education and the current figure was in excess of 90. The majority of children being home educated were being done so to help protect family members who were vulnerable or where parents had enjoyed teaching their children at home during the spring and summer term of this year.
- A small number of children (c20) were not attending school due to anxiety not a pre-existing medical condition. In these circumstances, expert panels had been developed to support and reassure children and families and help them transition back to school.
- It was also emphasised that with current school attendance at 92%, this is not substantially different from attendance figures pre-Covid where 95% would be expected.
- Whilst it was acknowledged that there had been government rhetoric around the imposition of fines for children missing from school, this was not reflected in the approach of the authority which had sought to adopt an empathetic approach to parents who were anxious about sending their children to school.

13.4 Was there any relationship between attendance rates in schools and rising levels of local Covid infections?

- While school attendance was 88% when schools first returned in September, this figure had been increasing slowly through the autumn term as parental confidence in school safety measures appeared to improve. The Education Service would continue to monitor school attendances,

particularly in light of the new lockdown to be introduced on 5th November 2020.

13.5 The Chair thanked the Director of Education for this urgent update.

The meeting closed at 21.35