

Minutes

CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE

20 March 2025



Meeting held at Committee Room 5 - Civic Centre

	<p>Committee Members Present: Councillor Heena Makwana (Chair), Councillor Peter Smallwood OBE, Councillor Kishan Bhatt, Councillor Tony Gill, Councillor Rita Judge, and Councillor Jan Sweeting (Opposition Lead)</p> <p>Co-Opted Member Present: Tony Little</p> <p>Officers Present: Abi Preston (Director of Education & SEND) Nav Minhas (School Places Planning & Policy Manager) Gary Binstead (Senior SEND & Inclusion Commissioner) Michael Hawkins (Head of Education & Lifelong Learning) Ryan Dell (Democratic Services Officer) Naveed Ali (Democratic Services Apprentice)</p>
66.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies were received from Councillor Becky Haggar OBE.</p>
67.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>None.</p>
68.	<p>MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the previous meeting be agreed</p>
69.	<p>TO CONFIRM THAT THE ITEMS OF BUSINESS MARKED AS PART I WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THAT THE ITEMS MARKED AS PART II WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE (<i>Agenda Item 4</i>)</p>
70.	<p>SCHOOL ORGANISATION PLAN INC. SCHOOL PLACES PLANNING UPDATE (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p> <p>Members asked about any reasons for reductions in projections, especially in the primary range, since the previous School Organisation Plan.</p> <p>Officers noted that a range various formula were used for creating projections. This</p>

was reviewed on an annual basis. Projections had been accurate over recent years, and officers were confident in their accuracy. There had been a slight change in the birth rate, which would impact projections. Other considerations included migration to the borough and changes in the demographic with the authority.

The methodology for secondary places using two education planning areas was discussed. Issues such as fewer first preferences in secondary schools, mismatches between children going north and south, and the unintended consequences of children spending more time travelling to school were raised. Use of the Fair Access Panel was also noted. Whilst discussions had taken place on reverting to three planning areas, the number of planning areas remained at two, and the peak for Year 7s had passed. Surplus places were expected to appear after September 2026. Bulge classes had been requested over the last five to six years as the new free school had not come online as planned. These bulge classes were unlikely to be needed moving forward.

Members raised concerns about the potential future lack of space in secondary schools due to the current bulge problem. Members asked how secondary schools would be supported. The School Organisation Plan helped with conversations with primary and secondary leads that were ongoing, and PAN reductions were part of the strategy to avoid financial difficulties for schools. Termly monitoring would also help. It was noted that parental preference was key.

Members asked about the retention of teachers and the quality of teaching provision across the borough. Officers noted that it was a competitive market but currently there were no major challenges being reported by schools. Vacancies were staffed by fully qualified teachers. There was a healthy initial teacher training programme. Recruitment from overseas was also common. Hillingdon was an attractive place for teachers, and the outer London weighting was noted.

Members noted the inner and outer London weighting, and suggested best practices such as relaxed working days and PPA time from home. Officers noted that there were more challenges around recruiting special needs teachers. Schools were encouraged to create supportive mechanisms for recruitment, but local decisions varied. There was a longer term plan to work with schools on these types of strategies.

Members addressed the issue of providing enough places for children with special needs within the borough. The number of special school places currently exceeded the national average, and efforts were being made to support children with EHCPs accessing mainstream education. Officers had been doing a lot of work around banding and identifying different needs, and would then create admissions guidance to support this. It was noted that the complexity of needs was increasing, but there were more places than the national average. A new free special school was due to come online in the next few years, and more places were being created around SRPs (specialist resource provision) and DUs (designated units). An upcoming project would involve developing more SRPs and DUs in secondaries to ensure that they match the numbers in primaries to provide a clear pathway. There was not a need currently for more special school places. There were a mix of children in mainstream schools who could benefit from special school and vice versa.

Members asked about the timeframe for the rebanding project. This had been ongoing for the past 18 months and an external specialist SEND consultant had been utilised to lead on it. This had been done in partnership with school leaders. The mainstream banding framework had been completed and implemented in September 2024. The

special school framework had just been completed and was about to be implemented from 01 April. The mainstream framework would be implemented over two years, while the special school framework would be implemented all in one go. Some schools would see a loss in funding and so officers were putting transitional funding arrangements in place. This work meant that there was a clear vision and would help in future planning.

Members asked about the key performance indicators used to monitor the effectiveness of school placements. The School Organisation Plan had been a positive step forward in helping monitor numbers and ensuring sufficient places. Regular conversations with schools were held to support them. Officers aimed for a 5-8% vacancy level to allow for different movements in and out of the borough. This also helped avoid too many unfilled places which may have financial disadvantages. Ensuring that schools and parents can understand the School Organisation Plan was also important.

Members asked if it was policy to direct children with SEND to schools with inclusive practices. Officers noted that the approach was the opposite of this. A key part of the strategy was for all schools to be inclusive. It was noted that some schools were hotspots for SEND and attracted families because of their good practise. An approach within the strategy was to consult with the nearest mainstream school that had the capacity and resources. Efforts were being made to support all schools in becoming inclusive. Officers further noted the EHCP Plus team to support complex needs, and the pilot project with the Centre for ADHD and Autism whereby there was a youth worker in four secondary schools to support inclusion when transitioning to secondary phase.

Members asked about the need to put more SRPs in secondary schools. Conversations with secondary schools were ongoing, and efforts were being made to match the number of places in primary and secondary schools.

Members asked about a site for the new free school. There was a site earmarked, but officers were awaiting an update from the DfE.

Members addressed the capacity to provide early years education for all children. Currently, there were sufficient places, but close monitoring was needed.

Members suggested conducting an audit of unfilled class spaces in primary schools. Logistical considerations would have to be made for this. Officers noted that net capacity assessments were being done, and conversations with schools about available capacity were ongoing. A full audit could be looked into, but this would be difficult without looking at each school in detail to ascertain their capacity needs. It was noted that teams were encouraged to go out and visit schools a lot.

Members noted that it would be useful to have a map of Year 7 placements

RESOLVED: That the Children, Families & Education Select Committee:

- 1. Considered the updated School Organisation Plan with the latest data and forecasts; and**
- 2. Delegated comments for inclusion in the Cabinet Member report to the Democratic Services Officer in conjunction with the Chair and in consultation with the Opposition Lead**

71.	<p>OUTCOME OF THE CONSULTATION FOR THE PROPOSAL TO AMALGAMATE GRANGE PARK INFANT AND NURSERY SCHOOL AND GRANGE PARK JUNIOR SCHOOL (<i>Agenda Item 6</i>)</p> <p>Members considered the report on the proposed amalgamation of Grange Park Infant and Nursery School and Grange Park Junior School.</p> <p>Members noted that the amalgamated schools would be in the same building, and it was acknowledged that there were some concerns from parents. However, it was noted that this was a good fit.</p> <p>Officers noted that 87% of respondents through the consultation were in support of the proposal, and of the respondents, more than half were parents at the school.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families & Education Select Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reviewed the proposal to amalgamate Grange Park Infant and Nursery School and Grange Park Junior School, by closing Grange Park Infant and Nursery School, and extending the age range of the Junior School from 7-11-year-olds, to 3-11-year-olds; 2. Noted the 84 responses from the consultation in response to both proposals; and 3. Delegated comments for inclusion in the Cabinet report to the Democratic Services Officer in conjunction with the Chair and in consultation with the Opposition Lead
72.	<p>ANNUAL EDUCATION STANDARDS REPORT (<i>Agenda Item 7</i>)</p> <p>Members raised concerns about the gap between non-disadvantaged and disadvantaged students in Hillingdon, compared to statistical neighbours, and asked about bridging the gap. Officers acknowledged the issue and noted the launch of a program in November to address this gap. The program involved collaboration with the Education Endowment Foundation in partnership with schools and aimed to improve standards for vulnerable groups, including those on the pupil premium and special educational needs registers. This would also involve looking at what can be learned from other boroughs. It was noted that a number of schools, both primary and secondary, were doing excellently.</p> <p>Members pointed out discrepancies in the report regarding Hillingdon's performance compared to statistical neighbours. The report stated that Hillingdon was generally in line with national and statistical benchmarks for Key Stage 2 outcomes, but the data showed otherwise. Officers agreed to ensure this would be more clear in future.</p> <p>Members highlighted concerns about early years outcomes, noting that Hillingdon children were underperforming compared to national and London averages. Officers explained that efforts were being made to improve early years outcomes through collaboration with schools and the Education Endowment Foundation. The focus was on language and communication, with a heavy emphasis on early years education.</p> <p>Members inquired about the review process for who the statistical neighbours were,</p>

and whether the benchmarks were still relevant. Officers explained that the focus was primarily on London neighbours (i.e. Brent and Harrow), as they provide a more accurate comparison. Officers emphasised the importance of looking at what worked in other boroughs and applying those strategies in Hillingdon. It was not just about teaching and learning, all schools had flagged attendance as an issue. For example, there were currently 1,000 children with a known social worker, and their attendance rates varied but were generally not high enough to have significant achievement.

Members requested more detailed information on subject performance across the borough, particularly for children with SEND and especially in secondary schools. Officers noted that this information was available and it was suggested that the report could be revamped to include this information in future.

Members raised concerns about the number of secondary schools on the at-risk register. Officers clarified that the number of schools on the at-risk register had decreased since 2023-24 from seven. The register was used to track and support schools in need. Officers emphasised the importance of providing targeted support to these schools. Some schools were on the register as a caution.

Members asked about the communication and implementation of the five-year priorities outlined in the report. Officers explained that the priorities had been shared with all schools and stakeholders. Discussions were being held with schools before the draft education strategy was published. A data dashboard was being created to track progress and ensure effective implementation.

Members inquired about culturally specific interventions for underachieving disadvantaged groups, such as white British, black Caribbean, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students. Members also asked about how pupil premium funding was used to narrow the achievement gap. Officers noted that firstly, awareness of the issues was needed to give the opportunity for people to review and interrogate their data. It was noted that other components were involved. For example, for black Caribbean students, across the country over the last 25 years there was a higher level of exclusions. Officers explained that the focus was on quality first teaching in the mainstream classroom rather than wraparound interventions, and providing opportunities for schools to review and improve their pupil premium strategies. Collaboration with the Education Endowment Foundation was ongoing.

Members asked about comparisons between courses on offer in Hillingdon compared to its statistical neighbours, specifically for Key Stage 4 and 5. Officers noted Uxbridge College which had a vast offer including level 1 courses. Officers were confident in the range of courses available. It was noted that some schools had stuck with A Levels because of the demand for this, while some students moved on to college because the courses they wanted were not available in school. It was noted that big further education colleges had a wider range of offers. Officers had a good relationship with Uxbridge College and were working with them, and working with them to work with schools and to be more collaborative as well. It was further noted that young people had a range of options. Officers had produced a prospectus which included all of the post 16 providers and schools, and also helped year 11s understand their pathway. This was due to be made available on mobile. This could be shared with Members.

Members asked about the reasons for elective home education and monitoring the progress of home-educated children. Officers explained that the reasons for elective home education were varied. If a family decided to home educate, the current school

	<p>should conduct an interview which asks for a reason why, though the Council relied on parents sharing this information, which was not always the case. Officers were trying to ensure that people were not being forced to home educate, and Government had indicated bringing in a register with more parental obligations. Gaps in monitoring progress of home educated young people also existed as this also required parental engagement. Safeguarding remained a concern as home educated young people were less visible. Some may have child protection plans or child in need plan and so collaboration was important.</p> <p>Members asked about the speed of identifying, and characteristics of, children missing from education. There were different elements involved such as keeping children safe in education, and children with unexplainable absences which should be referred to children's social care. The attendance team worked closely with schools to identify and support children missing from education. It was noted that while sporadic attendance had been a problem, overall attendance had improved in the borough. The characteristics of these children were being analysed to provide targeted support.</p> <p>On the Fair Access Panel, Members raised concerns about children traveling long distances to school, especially from the south of the borough. Officers acknowledged the issue and explained that the admissions team worked proactively with academies and maintained schools to address this concern. There was still work to do but every individual child was monitored.</p> <p>Members noted that three children had been referred to the Fair Access Panel whereby 'a place has not been sought due to exceptional circumstances', and asked what this meant. Officers noted that this included one young person who had experienced a mental health breakdown which led to hospital admission. This young person was identified by CAMHS as not fit for school. There were instances linked to emotionally based school non-attendance of young people feeling suicidal about school.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families & Education Select Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Noted the key findings set out in the report; and 2. Delegated comments for inclusion in the Cabinet Member report to the Democratic Services Officer in conjunction with the Chair and in consultation with the Opposition Lead
73.	<p>PLACE2BE (<i>Agenda Item 8</i>)</p> <p>This item was deferred from the agenda.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the item be deferred</p>
74.	<p>PERSISTENT ABSENTEEISM REVIEW: DRAFT FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS (<i>Agenda Item 9</i>)</p> <p>On 07 March, Councillor Makwana and Councillor Sweeting had met with officers to discuss a draft set of recommendations for the review. Following this, an updated set of draft recommendations had been circulated to Members. The Committee were now looking to move towards finalising the recommendations.</p> <p>Members noted that in the witness session with parents, a number of witnesses had</p>

noted educational benefits outside of school. Members noted that as school was not quite compulsory, there was no advocate for the benefits of education. It was suggested that the Local Authority should play this role. Theme 1 of the revised draft recommendations referred to informing people of the impact of absence, however a more positive message should be given of the benefits of education and attending school, to include social benefits as well as educational. Whilst it was noted that draft recommendation 1 was trying to capture collaboration between parties, there should be more explicit reference to the positive value of education in the final set of recommendations, and the role of the authority in promoting this value.

Members cited the witness session with schools and referred to draft recommendation 8 and suggested a poster campaign to put out the message of the benefits of school, and to get this message across as early as possible. It was suggested that such posters could be put up in schools, libraries, Council venues and Hillingdon People, as it was important to get this message across as the earliest possible point.

Members highlighted the issue of getting children the right help, whether this be mental health or special educational needs assistance, noting that these young people were often worst affected by absence. It was suggested that the draft recommendations did not draw attention to the appropriate officers or to CAMHS, or highlight the necessity of meeting deadlines and getting young people the help they need as fast as was practicable. Such delays could lead to unnecessary additional absence. It was suggested the draft recommendation 4 (theme 2) be amended to reflect this.

Members referred to the witness session with young people, who had spoken about gang culture and gang violence. This was not reflected in the draft recommendations. Members noted the importance of parents but also of external stakeholders in providing training around the impact of gang culture. Members further noted the impact of mental health, and difficulties parents may experience in facing this. A common theme from the young people had been schools not picking up on such issues early enough, and so Members suggested a need to review internal policies and processes to better identify mental health needs.

Members suggested referring to Government funding for mental health training and the possibility of mental health mentors in all schools. It was also suggested that there be a whole Council approach to absenteeism, not just one department tackling the issue. It was suggested that other authorities could be researched to see how they were tackling the issue. It was also suggested that information provided by schools could be revisited to see if the final recommendations could be strengthened.

Members highlighted sharing good practise. The Chair highlighted draft recommendation 5 which made reference to existing attendance cluster groups, where schools got together to discuss issues. It was highlighted that officers had shared a briefing note outlining that there was lots of work ongoing, and positive progress had been made. It was noted that draft recommendation 5 may need to be amended to better reflect this.

Members highlighted draft recommendation 6 (Hillingdon Attendance Awards initiative), and it was suggested to include nurseries and early years settings in this as a method of early intervention. Other Members suggested that often, attendance of the youngest children was more reflective of parents, and so including nurseries and early years settings may be rewarding parents' behaviour rather than the young person, whilst not rewarding older young people who may not benefit from such parental assistance. It

	<p>was noted that this linked to the wider point of parents valuing education.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families & Education Select Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Considered possible conclusions, findings and draft recommendations in relation to the review; 2. Agreed to delegate any further changes to the review recommendations to Democratic Services in conjunction with the Chair and in consultation with the Opposition Lead; and 3. Agreed to receive the final review report back for consideration with recommendations before submission to Cabinet
75.	<p>FORWARD PLAN (<i>Agenda Item 10</i>)</p> <p>Members considered the Forward Plan.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the Forward Plan</p>
76.	<p>WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 11</i>)</p> <p>Members considered the Work Programme.</p> <p>Members noted that the next meeting was scheduled to have an update on school admissions. Members asked if this could include a map of Year 7 placements. Members also noted that it would be useful to have an audit of unfilled secondary school places.</p> <p>Members noted that there were due to be regular budget and spending reports to future meetings. It was confirmed that the Corporate Directors were due to attend future Select Committees for this item.</p> <p>Members further noted that importance of the relevant Corporate Director attending, if not the Corporate Director of Finance, for these items.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families & Education Select Committee considered the report and agreed any amendments</p>
	<p>The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 8.25 pm.</p>

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Ryan Dell on democratic@hillingdon.gov.uk. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.