

Minutes

CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE

09 January 2024



Meeting held at Committee Room 5 - Civic Centre
High Street, Uxbridge, UB8 1UW

	<p>Committee Members Present: Councillor Heena Makwana (Chair), Councillor Becky Haggar OBE (Vice-Chair), Councillor Peter Smallwood, Councillor Kishan Bhatt, Councillor Tony Gill, Councillor Kamal Kaur, and Councillor Jan Sweeting (Opposition Lead)</p> <p>Co-Opted Member Present: Tony Little</p> <p>Officers Present: Michael Hawkins (Head of Education and Lifelong Learning) Dan Kennedy (Corporate Director of Central Services) Abi Preston (Director of Education and SEND) Kathryn Angelini (Assistant Director for Education and Vulnerable Children) Ryan Dell (Democratic Services Officer)</p>
48.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies were received from Councillor Rita Judge with Councillor Kamal Kaur substituting.</p>
49.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>None.</p>
50.	<p>MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the previous meeting be agreed.</p>
51.	<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>
52.	<p>UKRAINIAN CHILDREN UPDATE (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p> <p>The Committee received an update on education support for refugees from Ukraine. This was the second update provided to the Committee.</p>

Officers highlighted the ongoing support for those displaced by the conflict in Ukraine, emphasising collaboration with various organisations, including schools, and the provision of housing by resident hosts in the borough. The Committee was informed about the extensive efforts to ensure that displaced families successfully integrated into the community.

Officers outlined support arrangements, with a particular focus on St Mary's provision. St Mary's, a Ukrainian School, played a crucial role in providing education support. The Education Improvement Team collaborated with schools to offer advice, guidance, and training to support Ukrainian children, especially those with trauma or suspected special educational needs. Importantly where English was an additional language, information was provided in different languages including Ukrainian.

Several support services were noted, including an educational psychology offer, school support, and a two-year service offer for an additional language and speech service available to all schools in the borough. Hub schools and a mentoring program for Ukrainian refugees were also highlighted.

The range of support available had reflected conversations officers had had with schools, particularly those in the south of the borough, about some of the need, not just about Ukrainian refugees, but in general.

Hillingdon employed three people on fixed term contracts with the funding including the program manager, who was a lawyer and a refugee parent; and another member of staff was also a refugee parent.

Some of the families from Ukraine were actually Afghani and so there were a group of Afghani refugee families from Ukraine who had been displaced twice and the program manager and a number of others actively worked with Afghani support groups across West London.

Officers expanded on St Mary's provision, explaining the collaboration with the Ukrainian school and the introduction of education support workers trained to address trauma and health pathways. The team successfully supported families, identified Ukrainian children in schools, and facilitated access to various services.

Members enquired about the long-term plans for St Mary's provision and the potential impact of Oak Wood School's full capacity (St Mary's Ukrainian school had opened a supplementary school based at Oak Wood School). Officers shared information about the initial one-year arrangement and the need for future discussions about funding continuation.

The Homes for Ukraine group were the sponsored group for funding. In total there had been 118, and currently there were 64 children under this scheme. Members enquired about the capacity of St Mary's provision, and officers provided information about the fluid situation. St Mary's had identified 148 Ukrainian children in Hillingdon schools, not all of whom were under the Homes for Ukraine programme, some were under the Friends and Family scheme. Support for Ukrainian children was advertised in every school and a number of key documents were translated into Ukrainian. Families did not want documents translated into Russian.

The Committee discussed the potential return of Ukrainian families to Ukraine and the availability of online learning for Ukrainian children. The education psychology offer

was explained, whereby 32 days of support was commissioned to work with Ukrainian children including support for health pathways for those who have been identified with trauma and individual schools who need some support in supporting and assessing children with suspected undiagnosed special education needs.

Members expressed support for Ukraine and asked about the challenges faced by young people returning to Ukraine. The Committee discussed maintaining contact with families, supporting children's qualifications, and addressing their needs. The LEAP portal was used for resources and communication. Via the virtual Ukrainian school some children had continued their education directly with schools in Ukraine.

On qualifications, parents had fed back that they were happy with the qualifications that their children were working towards. Creative subjects were not as valued in the Ukrainian education system and so parents were happy with the subjects available.

Members enquired about the regularity of contact with settled families, and officers explained the case-by-case approach based on the families' needs. Placement in schools was discussed, with assurance that there were no known pressures on finding school places for Ukrainian children in the borough.

Members asked about the utilisation of available funding by schools. Officers explained the initial lack of awareness and the ongoing efforts to encourage schools to use the funding for targeted support. The Committee discussed potential future funding and the extension of the support model to other refugee groups. For other groups of refugees such as Sudanese and Afghans who were supported with funding, officers were working with an organisation called Trinity for a similar model of support, although the grant funding did not extend into all of the same areas that it did for Ukrainians.

Members asked about contact between the Council and voluntary sector partners with those who had settled in Hillingdon. Officers worked with Trinity and worked with people on a case-by-case basis, for example new arrivals or those who need to make connections or might need extra support. Once this initial support had been provided, many families were happy to move on.

Members asked about the 12 children attending out-of-Borough schools, and whether this was down to capacity or personal choice. Officers stated that there was not a known issue with accommodating children. It may depend on where the families were being hosted.

Members asked about available funding and the possibility of additional funds for the increasing number of Ukrainian families. The allocation of funding depended on the visa scheme on which the family arrived (e.g. Homes for Ukraine). The Government had confirmed that funding for hosts will continue and this would aid stability. Members asked about the flexibility of unused funding, and officers clarified that it was ring-fenced for Ukrainian children but encouraged creative ways to utilise it for effective support.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the information presented within the report and asked questions about the support being provided to children

53. **SCHOOL ADMISSIONS ARRANGEMENTS - WHITEHALL INFANT/ JUNIOR**
(Agenda Item 6)

Officers presented a report on changes to School Admission Arrangements. The focus was on the proposed reduction in Published Admission Numbers (PAN) for Whitehall Infant School and Whitehall Junior School, suggesting a decrease from 120 to 90 in both schools. The reasoning behind this recommendation was related to the financial viability of classes, as it was deemed necessary to have around 25 children per class to achieve this. Continuous reviews of PAN and admissions arrangements were conducted to ensure schools can manage financially while meeting local demand.

The School Admissions Code mandated consultation on all changes for a minimum of six weeks. The consultation period for this proposal took place between 23 October and 18 December, with no responses received. The report emphasised the importance of monitoring changing numbers over time to align with demand.

Members raised concerns about the available spaces in primary planning area six, citing the census from the previous year. Members highlighted the limited spaces between schools, especially in reception classes (based on the Census May 2023 Roll). Expressing concern about the proposed reduction for Whitehall, Members urged consideration of current year numbers instead of relying on last year's data. Officers noted that the confirmed entry numbers for September 2023 for Whitehall Infant School was 93 and for Whitehall Junior School was 87, which represented a significant reduction. This decline was attributed to a projected decrease in roles. Officers were monitoring to ensure that PANs were in line with demand. Officers were also creating a School Organisation Plan with more detailed projections. It was noted that if schools reduced their PAN, they could increase them later if required.

Members noted the overall decrease in primary numbers across the borough. Officers clarified that the decrease was a pan-London issue, and the primary goal was to be responsive to changes to avoid financial challenges for schools. Officers assured that they were closely monitoring numbers and creating a detailed School Organisation Plan for projections over time. The flexibility within the system allowed schools to adjust their PAN according to demand.

Members enquired about the seven empty classrooms between the two schools and suggested considering the utilisation of vacant classrooms for other purposes, such as temporary SEND provision or Council initiatives. Officers acknowledged the challenge of setting up temporary provisions and emphasised the need for careful decision-making. Officers noted ongoing collaboration with schools to explore creative ways to support them. It was noted that creating SEND provision had to comply with regulations.

Members raised a question about teacher redundancies due to decreasing roles. Officers noted that schools would gradually reduce staffing over time, avoiding large-scale redundancies.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- 1. Reviewed the proposed changes to Hillingdon's Admissions Arrangements detailed in the Cabinet report;**
- 2. Noted the NIL response from the consultation on a PAN change to a community primary phase school; and**

3. Delegated to the Democratic Services Officer in conjunction with the Chairman (and in consultation with the Opposition Lead) to agree comments to be submitted to Cabinet.

54. DPS FOR ALTERNATIVE PROVISION - EDUCATION AND SEND (*Agenda Item 7*)

Officers introduced a report on the Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) for alternative provision, which was presented to Cabinet in December 2023 and was due to be launched in Hillingdon in April 2024. The DPS aimed to create an alternative provision directory, allowing officers from various local authority services to commission alternative provision for children with diverse needs. This could range from those who had been permanently excluded to those with special educational needs or disabilities.

Previous arrangements for commissioning alternative provision were quite individualised, where officers could make individual decisions on packages of support for children and young people. The DPS sought to streamline the process; enable greater quality assurance; ensure better safeguarding; and to hold providers more accountable for outcomes. Previously, there was not a particular service that had oversight of this. Now, there was a Vulnerable Learners Support Manager to do this and officers would be monitoring all outcomes. Officers had already launched a tracking system ready for the system's launch in April.

Officers added that alternative provision was one of the key ambitions of the SEND Strategy, which had been presented to a previous Select Committee. As part of the governance framework there was an alternative provision group that would have strategic oversight of progress and development.

Members suggested, and the Chair agreed, adding an information item on alternative provision to the work programme, given numerous questions on the topic.

Members expressed concerns about negative comments received during the consultation and questioned if the new system would deliver better outcomes, especially regarding good academic attainment. Officers explained that officers will still have input as they would complete a referral form and be able to be more specific about their aims – thinking about alternative provision as an intervention as opposed to a destination. This profile would go out to one of four 'lots' of providers included in the DPS, providing options for children, ensuring better value for money. Providers would come back with an offer if they feel they can meet the needs of the child in the profile and then officers could make a decision on what was best for that young person based on the offers that had come in. Monitoring and tracking systems were in place to assess outcomes, and strategic oversight was ensured through the SEN strategy governance framework.

Members asked about the confidence officers had in having a diverse range of providers. Officers noted that they had already held two stakeholder events where providers were invited to come in. These were both very well attended and officers were confident that, just with the interest in those events alone, that there would be a good range of providers. These events included providers that Hillingdon was already working with as well as potential new providers. The tendering process opened on the previous Friday and providers were already showing interest.

Members asked about safeguarding where more than one provider was required.

Officers noted that typically they would not expect a young person to need two providers at any one time. A young person would be on the role of one provider and if they needed supplementary support, the safeguarding responsibility would be with whoever was commissioning the provision. If a young person was remaining on the role of their school and they were commissioning the alternative provision then the school still remained the overall responsible party.

Officers further explained that providers on the DPS would be on there for seven years, the Council would enter into a service level agreement with them as part of the process.

RESOLVED: That the Children, Families and Education Select Committee noted the report.

55. **MAJOR REVIEW: SCOPING - ABSENTEEISM** (*Agenda Item 8*)

The Chair noted that the previous major review report on the Stronger Families Hub had been presented to, and recommendations agreed at, Cabinet in November 2023.

It was summarised that at the previous meeting, a number of potential review topics had been discussed. This had led to a general consensus that absenteeism would be a good topic to review, with a focus on persistent absenteeism.

Following this, a scoping report on the topic of persistent absenteeism was drafted and brought to the current meeting. Members considered the scoping report with a view to confirming a review topic.

Officers noted that the bulk of the introduction to the topic of persistent absenteeism had been presented, along with the other potential topics, at the previous meeting.

Members sought to refine the draft Terms of Reference within the scoping report:

The first suggested amendment was to Term of Reference 1, to include a reference to primary planning areas.

The next suggestion was to ensure that there was not just a focus on the impact of COVID-19 but also other factors.

A further suggestion focused on Term of Reference 4 and the reference to partnership working to ensure that there would be engagement with parents/carers, young people, teachers, officers and other stakeholders.

Furthermore, an additional Term of Reference was suggested to look at what other Local Authorities, including statistical neighbours, were doing to tackle the problem of persistent absenteeism.

Members further noted the escalating prominence of absenteeism, both as a result of but also outside of the impact of COVID-19.

Members asked about the possibility of including a look at what the Council had been doing previously to tackle the issue of persistent absenteeism, and how this had been impacted by COVID-19.

	<p>Members further noted the possibility of refining the review into cohorts, age groups, and geographical areas.</p> <p>Members asked about the baseline figures for absenteeism and especially persistent absenteeism. It was noted that within the scoping report, the figure for persistent absenteeism within Hillingdon for the 2022/2023 academic year was 33.96%, and at the beginning of the 2023/2024 academic year the figure was 17.3%. Officers noted that the figure for 2023/2024 was lower in part because it was taken from a snapshot of just the Autumn term. It was estimated to be around 19% currently, and it was further noted that the figure for this point during the current year was lower than this point in the previous year. In summary, the baseline figure was the end of the academic year.</p> <p>Members further noted that potential that the review had to make positive change. Members further noted external issues and risks, and the potential to look to the future, with a view to prevention.</p> <p>Members noted that some actions had already taken place, as noted within the report and suggested that it would be beneficial to get updates on these actions.</p> <p>In summary, the Committee agreed to undertake its next review into the topic of persistent absenteeism. Next steps, including identifying potential witnesses, contacting schools and devising a plan of witness sessions would take place going forward.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families and Education Select Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discussed the absenteeism topic idea with a view to deciding on a review topic; and 2. Confirmed that persistent absenteeism would be the topic of the next major review.
56.	<p>MINUTES OF CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL (<i>Agenda Item 9</i>)</p> <p>Members considered the minutes of the previous Corporate Parenting Panel meeting.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families and Education Select Committee noted the minutes.</p>
57.	<p>FORWARD PLAN (<i>Agenda Item 10</i>)</p> <p>The Chair noted the ‘Staying Close Support for Care Experienced Young People’ report would be going to Cabinet in February, and that this was referenced at the previous Corporate Parenting Panel meeting in November 2023.</p> <p>Members asked about the budget report. Officers noted that this report along with the Adult Learn annual review had been moved to the February Committee agenda. Members further asked if the budget report would include the consultation document that referred to schools funding. The Chair noted that this did not usually come to Committee.</p> <p>Members asked if the School Organisation Plan would be coming to Committee. Officers noted that this was due to come to the Select Committee in March before</p>

	<p>going to Cabinet in April.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families and Education Select Committee noted the Cabinet Forward Plan</p>
58.	<p>WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 11</i>)</p> <p>Members requested a future item on Alternative Provision.</p> <p>Members requested a future item on Higher Education in the Borough and suggested inviting witnesses from Brunel University London and other providers.</p> <p>Members noted that this Select Committee was the only Select Committee due to receive the budget report after the public consultation had closed, suggesting that any members of the public who may watch/ attend the Committee would not have a change to incorporate that into their response to the public consultation.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families and Education Select Committee considered the report and agreed the above amendments.</p>
	<p>The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 8.05 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.