

## Minutes

### SOCIAL CARE, HOUSING AND PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

26 November 2020

Meeting held at VIRTUAL - Live on the Council's  
YouTube channel: Hillingdon London



	<p><b>Committee Members Present:</b> Councillors Ian Edwards (Chairman) Heena Makwana (Vice-Chairman) Tony Eginton (Opposition Lead) Janet Gardner Becky Haggart Paula Rodrigues Steve Tuckwell</p> <p><b>Witnesses Present:</b> Stephanie and Toni Mullally – representing HACS</p> <p><b>LBH Officers Present:</b> Tiffany Boreham, Benefits Team Manager Gavin Fernandez, Head of Service - Adult Social Care Sunita Ghudial, Benefit &amp; Governance Manager Kate Kelly-Talbot, Assistant Director - Adult Social Work Muir Laurie, Deputy Director of Exchequer Services &amp; Business Assurance Liz Penny, Democratic Services Officer Rod Smith, Residents Services - Tenancy Services</p>
24.	<p><b>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TO REPORT THE PRESENCE OF ANY SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS</b> (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Judith Cooper and Alan Deville.</p>
25.	<p><b>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING</b> (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>None.</p>
26.	<p><b>TO RECEIVE THE MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING DATED 21 OCTOBER 2020</b> (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p><b>RESOLVED:</b> That the minutes of the meeting dated 21 October 2020 be approved as an accurate record.</p>
27.	<p><b>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</b> (<i>Agenda Item 4</i>)</p> <p>It was confirmed that all items were in Part I and would be considered in public. It was</p>

agreed that items 6 and 8 would be considered in tandem as they were on a similar theme; item 7 would therefore be considered prior to item 6.

28. **COMMITTEE REVIEW: MAKING THE COUNCIL MORE AUTISM FRIENDLY: WITNESS SESSION 3** (*Agenda Item 5*)

HACS

Two witnesses were in attendance – Toni and Stephanie Mullally – representing Hillingdon Autistic Care and Support (HACS). Members were informed that HACS had been founded in 1997 by parents in of children in Hillingdon affected by autism. It was confirmed that HACS supported over 300 families at present and had a large professional database consisting of teachers, SENCOs, health visitors and mental health professionals.

Councillors heard that services offered included advice and guidance, family support, educational workshops, an employability project started in 2015 and an adult support group. The age range of those supported by HACS ranged from 2 years 8 months to 59 years. Members were advised that HACS was one of the only autism specific short breaks providers in the Borough providing weekend respite services for those aged 5 – 25 years. It was confirmed that autism was not classified as a learning disability or a mental health disorder. The term ‘high-functioning’ often used when referring to those with autism who did not have a learning disability was particularly unhelpful as it suggested that these individuals had less support needs; this was not necessarily the case therefore HACS avoided using this terminology.

The Committee requested further clarification regarding the effectiveness of the Government’s National Strategy on tackling autism. It was confirmed that there was now a clearer focus in terms of central Government legislation and attempts had been made to improve employment opportunities. However, although awareness was increasing, outcomes did not appear to be changing very much. On a localised level there was a more co-ordinated approach with agencies working together. It was noted that the National Strategy focused on adults. However, in Hillingdon, a decision had been taken to focus on children and families too. In response to their enquiries, Members were informed that it was difficult to access data in relation to autism therefore the tracking of outcomes locally was challenging. On a service level there had been a vast improvement since 2010 in terms of what was available for families to access; however, there was still a long way to go.

In response to questions from the Committee, it was confirmed that greater clarity was needed regarding the services provided by the local authority and how to access said services. It was reported that the information was currently not in a central location and was therefore not easy to locate. HACS received calls from GPs on a weekly basis asking how patients could get an autism diagnosis in Hillingdon. For those who were not eligible for specialist or statutory support, it was confirmed that availability of services was often an issue. It appeared that many Council officers lacked understanding of ASD. It was suggested that one option would be to train up a number of autism ambassadors across the Council (one ambassador per department) who could provide expertise in this area. Should the ambassador be unable to assist, a member of HACS could step in and offer support and expertise. The Committee was informed that Council departments did not appear to offer a joined up approach at present – families were often obliged to repeat themselves again and again when approaching different local authority departments which was exhausting and distressing. Members enquired whether a one front door approach would assist in

addressing this issue. HACS felt this would be very welcome; ideally people with autism would be allocated a key worker to help them navigate services. A one front door approach would help to reduce the frustration and distress experienced by those with autism when trying to access support services.

The Committee was informed that very few adult referrals were received by HACS; possibly because their adult services were still being developed and had only been live for approximately one year. There was scope for working much more closely with local authority adult services; particularly to raise awareness of HACS. It was confirmed that the response to a HACS autism awareness day held in 2019 had been excellent with some 500 people in attendance. There had been a number of inspirational speakers—some on the autism spectrum themselves – who had been very well received. An April 2020 version of the event had been planned to engage with adults and shape the development of adult services. Unfortunately, this had been postponed due to the pandemic but would take place in 2021.

Members enquired whether transport facilities, libraries, parks etc within Hillingdon were easily accessible to those with autism. It was confirmed that HACS had been working closely with libraries and young people from the HACS employability project had been offered work there to gain work experience. One young person had been offered a permanent position. Members were advised that, having been trained by HACS, library staff were now very autism aware. In terms of other facilities, it was reported that autism-friendly cinemas in the Borough had been successful and outdoor gyms in local parks were also popular – particularly with younger people with autism. The Rural Activities Garden Centre was another great resource and offered a safe, sensory environment. HACS managed the tea rooms there.

In response to further questions from the Committee, it was confirmed that autism friendly letters would be greatly welcomed as people with autism often struggled to understand letters or were unwilling to open them. An easy read format would be extremely helpful.

In terms of physically navigating the Borough, the Committee was advised that this was extremely challenging for people with autism. It was suggested that autistic adults would welcome the opportunity to be consulted on matters which affected them directly. An example was given of a shopping centre which had introduced autism quiet shopping hours once every three months from 10-11 on Sunday. This was impractical as it was too infrequent and coincided with universal worship time.

In response to further questioning from the Committee, it was confirmed that the nationally recognised incidence rate of autism was approximately one in one hundred. Members were informed that more could be done to support children in care in terms of support networks for foster carers etc. Members were informed that HACS had a strong relationship with the paediatricians on the Looked After Children Board and regularly made recommendations to foster parents and adoption panels. At present HACS were working with the kinship team to ascertain what type of assessments should be considered to assist a young person who was struggling to get an autism diagnosis.

Councillors sought further clarification regarding HACS and their work within schools. It was confirmed that HACS carried out training sessions in schools and supported parents of children with autism at annual reviews, in exclusion cases etc. Members were informed that HACS had a strong partnership with head teachers and SENCOs and worked closely with both mainstream and special schools.

The Chairman thanked HACS for their contribution to the review and congratulated them on their excellent work.

#### Autism Training within the Council

Kate Kelly-Talbot, Assistant Director – Adult Social Work, updated the Committee on autism training within the Council. Members were informed that, within the Council, two levels of training were available to staff – a General Autism Awareness module and a 2-day specialist training course offered to those carrying out assessments; the latter had been undertaken by approximately 120 Adult Social Care staff members to date. It was confirmed that all staff in the Learning Disabilities and Autism Service had completed the 2-day training course. The Committee heard that a number of frontline staff could benefit from the autism awareness training; e-learning Autism Awareness training had been developed and had been launched in Feb 2020. This training was available to all staff, but further work was planned to promote uptake. A more targeted approach may be required, but this work has been slightly delayed due to the pandemic.

New legislation was being brought in which would be closely monitored to ensure the Council's autism offer was updated and refreshed as necessary.

In response to questions from the Committee, it was confirmed that the e-learning training was ready to be rolled out. There was a need to consider which departments to target first and whether to include it as part of officer induction. Members were keen for this e-learning to be rolled out as quickly as possible to raise awareness among staff and assist in addressing the issues raised by HACS.

Democratic Services informed Committee Members that, as agreed, an autism survey had been circulated to 25 service managers across Council frontline departments. A report would be compiled to appraise the Committee of the results of the survey in due course.

#### **RESOLVED That the Committee:**

- 1) Gave consideration to the information provided in the verbal update; and**
- 2) Sought the views of the HACS witnesses and asked any necessary questions in support of the Committee's Review.**

#### **29. UPDATE ON ONLINE HOUSING BENEFIT APPLICATIONS** *(Agenda Item 6)*

Sunita Ghudial, Head of Benefits – Exchequer Services presented the report which had been prepared in February 2020 prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. An addendum had been included in the pack which captured the impact of the pandemic from 1 March 2020 onwards.

Members were informed that, prior to the pandemic, the benefits online facilities had been introduced for new claims on 12 June 2017 and fully rolled out on 21 May 2018. The service enabled customers to apply and report changes for Benefits and Council Tax Reduction online 24/7 at their convenience – this was a faster and more efficient system. It had also been brought in as part of the national shift towards claiming benefits online, which included the roll out of Universal Credit (UC). The Committee heard that UC had been fully rolled out in Hillingdon on 24 October 2018 – it was a single monthly payment which had to be applied for online. It was confirmed that the

majority of new claims for help with housing costs were now made through UC. Help with paying Council Tax was not included in the UC claim and was processed by the Local Authority's Benefits team.

The Committee was informed that the Benefits service continued to provide support for people who did not have access to online facilities or needed assistance to make a claim. There were 11 computers available in the Benefits reception area in the Civic Centre, 4 at the One Stop Shop in Hayes and others in libraries across the Borough. Benefits staff were available within the Civic Centre and at the One Stop Shop to assist. It was confirmed that, between 1 April 2019 and 30 September 2019, an average of 130 people per week had visited the Civic Centre to make an application, report a change or submit supporting documentation.

It was noted that the data in the addendum covered the period from 1 March 2020 to 31 August 2020. During the pandemic, staff had been advised to work from home and the Benefits reception had closed temporarily. Customers had been advised to go online or call the contact centre. Those who were unable to complete an online form had been advised to request a paper application. Members heard that demand was being managed successfully and on only one occasion had a face-to-face meeting been necessary.

Councillors were informed that, between 1 March 2020 and 31 August 2020, the Benefits Service had received 10,274 emails and 22,297 telephone calls. Of the new claims received during this period, over 82% had been submitted online successfully. 453 paper applications had been received which constituted 13% of the total. During this period the Benefits Service had seen an increase in applications of 63% compared to the period from 1 April 2019 to 30 September 2019. It was confirmed that, despite the increase in the number of applications, the Benefits service had seen an improvement in processing times and home working had been a major contributing factor in this.

Members thanked officers for the report and noted the significant impact of Covid-19 on online benefits services. Members were very impressed with the reported outcomes and thanked staff for their professionalism and innovation in rising to the challenge presented by the pandemic. It was suggested that some of the learning in terms of efficiencies would be beneficial in the future.

Members requested further clarification as to how the considerable improvements in processing times had been achieved. Tiffany Boreham, Benefits Team Manager, advised the Committee that, although it had been an extremely challenging time, the majority of staff had been successfully working from home. Members heard that the team had focussed on priority work, extra training had been provided, some staff members had been promoted as part of a re-structure and it had been possible to automate some processes to save time and work more efficiently. It was reported that there had been a huge increase in workload but fortunately no team members had been affected by Covid or taken ill. All staff were challenged, kept informed of progress and praised for the work they were doing. Members thanked Tiffany and her team for their hard work and impressive achievements to date.

In addition to the above, the Committee heard that teams across the Council had risen to the challenge presented by the pandemic and had worked collaboratively to ensure a joined-up response. At the onset of the pandemic, staff from the Counter Fraud team had been asked to work at office-based desktops and had handed over their laptops to benefits staff to enable them to work from home. It was confirmed that many members

of the benefits team had been working extra unpaid hours to get the job done and support vulnerable people. This had contributed to the massive increase in performance levels. Members welcomed this collaborative approach across the Council and expressed gratitude to all those involved.

Members reiterated their gratitude to all those involved in this endeavour and commended them for their valiant efforts in working proactively to get the job done and support residents during such a difficult time.

**RESOLVED: That the Social Care, Housing & Public Health Policy Overview Committee noted the contents of the report and sought clarification from officers as required.**

30. **CARERS STRATEGY - UPDATE ON WORK TO SUPPORT CARERS IN THE BOROUGH** (*Agenda Item 7*)

Gavin Fernandez, Head of Service – Adult Social Care presented the report. Members were informed that, in May 2020, Cabinet had been updated on the delivery of the Carers Strategy in 2019/20 and had agreed a proposed approach to support the Strategy going forward. The approach included priorities for 2020/2021. The report shared with the Committee provided Members with an update on the delivery of those priorities. Key points highlighted included:

- A guide for people who suddenly became carers was on track – an initial draft had been developed and was due for completion by Q4;
- A response to carers' feedback from the CCG's October 2019 AGM had been implemented and a Farsi speaking interpreter in the south of the Borough had been recruited;
- Information for children with learning disabilities and/or autism was being prepared including Easy to Read guidance on accessing the health service appropriately; and
- The Hillingdon Parents' Forum was working with officers to improve the information available on the Council's for parents of children and young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) conditions.

In terms of achievements from April – September 2020, Members were informed that some strong partnership working had been taking place during the pandemic. In the first 3 months of the pandemic, the Hillingdon Carer's Partnership had supported:

- 134 families to receive deliveries of meals;
- the delivery of 378 food parcels; and
- the collection of 296 prescriptions.

In Q2 £36.4k Covid grants had been secured to provide the following:

- Hardship grants to 40 families with Young Carers;
- Hardship grants to 23 Adult Carers; and
- 22 young adult carers with laptops to support their home study.

Other support had included providing regular care calls to over 1,034 carers and the completion of 324 Emergency Replacement Care Plans with Carers to ensure that alternative care arrangements were in place if the Carer was incapacitated for any

reason.

The Committee heard that the period from April to August 2020 had seen 525 Carers' Assessments completed which would suggest an outturn for 2020/21 of 1,260 assessments against a target of 986. There had also been positive increases to the Carers' Register – as at 30/9/20 there were 7,982 Adult Carers registered on the Hillingdon Carers' Partnership Carers' Register, which was an increase of 264 on the position in April and represented 30.7% of Adult Carers against a target of 28%. The Council's Carers' Champion, Councillor Haggar, had identified Carers with Multiple Caring Responsibilities as a focus area - the implications of these additional responsibilities on the wellbeing of Carers were being taken into consideration as part of the annual review process. Members were informed that all 43 of the GP practices that were members of the GP Confederation had now identified a Carers Lead to raise awareness among practice staff. Moreover, the Hillingdon Carers' Partnership had helped to improve the income of 140 Carers by securing an additional £607,397 in Carer-related benefits. 1,213 breaks had been provided via the Carers' Partnership during the review period – many in a virtual format due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Members congratulated officers on the report and were pleased to note the vast improvement in partnership working. In terms of challenges, Members sought further clarification regarding the difficulties faced during the pandemic and projections for the future. It was confirmed that the focus had been on linking all the partners together so as to not lose sight of Carers. A large amount of learning had taken place and the department was now better prepared to face the future.

In response to further queries from the Committee, it was confirmed that sources of information were available to assist Carers in securing their allowances. A sum of money had been secured by Hillingdon Carers through the DWP – the exact figure would be confirmed by Democratic Services at a later stage. Members requested further clarification regarding the likely challenges in supporting Carers in 2021/22. It was confirmed that many people had become Carers during lockdown and a whole system approach was required to ensure they were not lost in the system or left behind in the future.

Members enquired how businesses had been able to support Carers. It was agreed that officers would explore this further and clarify at a later stage. It was noted that, during the pandemic, respite services had been provided virtually. Feedback had generally been positive to date. Further details would be provided to the Committee following the meeting.

**RESOLVED That:**

- 1) the Committee noted progress against the Carers Strategy delivery plan activity for 2020/21;**
- 2) the Committee confirmed that reporting on the delivery of the Strategy should be annual and precede the annual progress report to Cabinet;**
- 3) Democratic Services contact officers to establish the exact sum of money secured by Hillingdon Carers through the DWP;**
- 4) Officers clarify how businesses were supporting Carers and;**
- 5) Further information be provided to the Committee in relation to the virtual respite services provided during the pandemic and feedback received in relation to them.**

8)

This report was presented in tandem with the Online Housing Benefit Applications update (agenda item 6). Rod Smith, Service Manager – Tenancy Services, presented this update on Universal Credit further to the 2019 extensive review. It was noted that the Committee had been mindful of the challenges facing vulnerable residents and had asked the Council's Universal Credit Project Group to explore several areas for possible improvement including –

- Strengthening collaborative work between key partners;
- Exploring opportunities for residents who lacked access to ICT or the skills to apply for and manage a claim;
- Developing clear processes and procedures for signposting residents;
- An increase in awareness of debt management;
- Appropriate training to staff across the Council.

A summary regarding the impact of Covid-19 and feedback from partners had been included in the report.

In response to questions from the Committee, it was confirmed that, although the focus had been on Universal Credit, the needs of vulnerable people and those with debts pre-Covid had also been taken into consideration. The approach had been to tailor services to individuals which included assisting people with financial issues and teaching them how to manage their housing costs, utility bills etc at a very challenging time when many people had found themselves without work. The focus had been on working collaboratively with partners to support those in need of help.

Members were glad to see that Universal Credit had been successfully rolled out and noted that staff at the One Stop Shop in Hayes had been extremely helpful in supporting residents seeking assistance pre-Covid. Members were delighted to note how much had continued to be achieved throughout the pandemic to support vulnerable residents.

The Committee noted that the trial managed migration in Harrogate had been suspended. It had also been reported in the press that, in the first 6 months of that managed migration in Harrogate, less than 20 cases had been successfully migrated to Universal Credit out of a total of 10,000. In light of this, Members enquired how Hillingdon was faring. It was confirmed that stress testing during the pandemic had strengthened the service; different ways of working had been introduced and changes made to meet demand. It was confirmed that existing claims in Hillingdon had been due to migrate over to Universal Credit in November 2020 but this had been delayed temporarily due to the pandemic.

In response to Members' requests for clarification it was confirmed that, although it was impossible to guarantee that no one had been missed, those who did not come forward were often evidenced by arrears of rent accruing. This would provide an indicator that there was a need to engage and support these people. It was reported that all Universal Credit claims had to be verified on behalf of the DWP and 100% of claims had been turned around within the required timeframe of 5 days. Staff had worked from home 7 days a week to meet these demands and had proactively contacted claimants to offer support.

Members extended their gratitude to all those involved in this endeavour and commended them for their valiant efforts in working proactively to get the job done and

support residents during such a difficult time.

**RESOLVED That the Committee:**

**Noted the continuing efforts of the Council and its partners to support residents in accessing and managing their Universal Credit claims and in particular the efforts of the Council and its partners to support vulnerable households in Hillingdon during the unprecedented financial challenges facing households as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.**

32. **FORWARD PLAN** (*Agenda Item 9*)

**RESOLVED: That the Social Care, Housing & Public Health Policy Overview Committee noted items going to Cabinet.**

33. **WORK PROGRAMME** (*Agenda Item 10*)

**RESOLVED: That the Social Care, Housing & Public Health Committee considered the Work Programme and noted its contents.**

The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 8.37 pm.

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Liz Penny on 01895 250185. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.

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