

Minutes

CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE

14 March 2024

Meeting held at Committee Room 6 – Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge, UB8 1UW

	<p>Committee Members Present: Councillor Heena Makwana (Chair), Councillor Becky Haggar OBE, Councillor Peter Smallwood, Councillor Kaushik Banerjee, Councillor Tony Gill, Councillor Rita Judge, and Councillor Jan Sweeting (Opposition Lead)</p> <p>Co-Opted Member Present: Tony Little</p> <p>Officers Present: Nav Minhas (School Place Planning and Policy Manager) Abi Preston (Director of Education and SEND) Kathryn Angelini (Assistant Director for Education and Vulnerable Children) Sally Edwards (Attendance Support Officer) Richard Woodfinn (School Improvement Advisor – Primary and Secondary) Ryan Dell (Democratic Services Officer)</p>
68.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies were received from Councillor Kishan Bhatt with Councillor Kaushik Banerjee substituting.</p> <p>(Apologies were received before the meeting from the Corporate Director of Children’s Services).</p>
69.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>None.</p>
70.	<p>MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>Members highlighted that the resolution of the Budget Proposals item noted that the Opposition Lead would be consulted. The Chair clarified that the Opposition Lead’s comments were received, and some of the points included.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the previous meeting be agreed.</p>

71.	<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>
72.	<p>SCHOOL ORGANISATION PLAN (INC. SCHOOL PLACES PLANNING) (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p> <p>Officers presented the draft School Organisation Plan.</p> <p>Officers noted the usefulness of the School Organisation Plan for schools in planning around pupil numbers and in strategic development. The draft Plan was divided into three sections: Introduction, Context and Strategy. These sections provided an overview of the education landscape in Hillingdon; a summary of current pupil numbers and projected demands in primary, secondary and specialist provision; and the options for the Local Authority to consider when determining the need to increase or reduce school places. It was emphasised that it was a statutory duty of the Local Authority to ensure a sufficiency of school places.</p> <p>Members expressed their satisfaction with the comprehensiveness of the report and thanked officers for their hard work.</p> <p>Members asked about PAN reductions and asked if the reductions were sufficient. Officers noted that they regularly reviewed census information. Alongside this, officers looked at preference data and had ongoing discussions with schools. The pupil roll had been declining in primary schools and there was pressure in secondary schools. PAN reductions were not always concentrated in a particular school. Schools were monitored and supported by education advisors and the admissions team. The recent occurrence of nine PAN reductions was noted as something that was not the norm, and it was noted that maintained schools and academies were supported in the same way.</p> <p>Members asked about the timing of the creation of the School Organisation Plan. Officers noted that there was no longer a statutory requirement to publish a School Organisation Plan, but it was good practise to have one. Officers further noted the alignment with other strategies such as the SEND, AP (alternative provision) and Education strategies and the need for timely dissemination of information to schools. There was pressure around primary places and the knock-on effect this would have on secondary places. The School Organisation Plan would help schools to have as much data and information as possible so that they were in the strongest position to be able to make appropriate plans.</p> <p>Members suggested this was a simplistic way of planning secondary places. When the School Organisation Plan was statutory, headteachers were consulted and noted that planning was very complex in the middle of the borough. There were formerly three secondary planning areas, north, central east, and central west, which gave a detailed idea of where the pressure was. Having separated north and south, it appeared that the pressure was in the</p>

north, when it was coming from the centre. Members suggested reverting to the use of former planning areas. Officers noted that any changes to planning areas had to go through the SCAP process so any changes would have to be requested. Officers highlighted that this suggestion may have been explored previously and rejected but would look into it.

Members asked about the forecasting process and the error margin around long-term forecasting. Officers suggested they could refer to the data team on this but suggested a variance of around 3%.

Members asked about the timescale for looking at changing secondary school capacity to match the surplus that would build up. Officers noted that this was currently happening. With current projections, the numbers were going to plateau in the coming year and beyond that start to reduce. Analysis of this was already underway. What officers wanted to do was, similar to in primaries, be able to use any surplus capacity to provide specialist places. There had been a series of SEND projects in the primary sector, and officers aimed to mirror this in the secondary sector.

Members noted their preferences for having yearly updates rather than twice-yearly. Members asked for clarification on how decisions were made to reduce PAN, amidst avoiding over-crowding and financial pressures. Officers noted that this involved ongoing conversations with schools, understanding what was working for them and where there were challenges. It was also dependent on year groups as there was more flexibility in Key Stage Two than in Key Stage One. Officers could explore informal caps and supporting schools with that. This was informal and so where there was demand, the full PAN would need to be used. It was also important to be flexible.

Members asked about long-term planning in terms of either increasing or decreasing PAN. Officers noted that having a plan such as the School Organisation Plan allowed a longer-term view on the direction of travel. However, officers would not want to be making big decisions on long term projections as they would not want to be putting the Council in financial risk for example. Having a School Organisation Plan was helpful as it allowed forward thinking. It would also be updated annually to reflect the direction of travel. Keeping in conversation with schools was important, and it was also important to be flexible as although pupil numbers were currently falling, this could change in the near future.

Members noted that Hillingdon had become a net exporter of students to neighbouring boroughs and suggested the use of a map to show exactly where the pressures were.

Members referred to the table of 'Total number of places available by phase', noting that the stated 5.6% difference between PAN and those on roll in secondary schools was not equal to the 8% required. Members further suggested that the 5.6% included bulge classes. Members asked when there would be enough wiggle room to allow move-ins, for example. Officers noted

that that 5.6% excluded bulge classes but included Studios and UTCs (university technical colleges) but would check again with the data team.

Members asked about PPA 3, and why there appeared to be a big drop off in surplus places from the current academic year moving forward. Officers noted that there had been a double counting for the PAN reductions in the 24/25 column. Where there was a difference of 30, this was because there were two PAN reductions that will come into effect this year but for infant and junior.

Members asked about vacant caretaker properties, noting that it was good that Hillingdon had already identified vacant properties suitable for SEND provision. Members asked if there were any timescales on this. Officers noted that they were only just starting these conversations, and this was another way of supporting schools financially whilst also helping with other Council objectives. This was an ongoing plan.

Members asked about how the Council had been working to reduce the number of children in Independent Non-Maintained Special School (INMSS) provision, and also about the number of children being sent outside of the borough who have SEND. Officers noted that they could provide this information outside of the meeting. Officers highlighted the importance of children with SEND being educated in their local community, and one of the key reasons for this was transport. Having to travel long distances to school could be difficult and affect social groups that young people made. Furthermore, it was important to ensure there were enough maintained local settings, including SRPs (specialist resource provision) and designated units. Officers were looking at special school admissions criteria so that there was a clear framework around which schools provided the right provision for the right need. As those building projects completed there would be more places within borough but Hillingdon did have quite a high level of special school places compared to national levels.

Members asked about assessment and how pupils were assessed in terms of determining the level of educational provision that they might need. Related to EHCPs, this would go through an assessment process that may involve an educational psychologist. This was often supplemented by a speech and language therapist report, occupational therapist assessment or medical report assessment. These assessments were pulled together to ensure the child's need was met. Officers would be putting together videos of maintained special schools so parents can see what they look like where physical visits can be difficult.

Members referred to the inadequate rating given to a special school and asked if there was an update on this. Officers clarified that this related to a school that had since closed and re-opened as a new school. Therefore, it was ungraded but was being monitored.

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

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Noted the draft School Organisation Plan; 2. Delegated to the Democratic Services Officer in conjunction with the Chair (and in consultation with the Opposition Lead) to agree comments to be submitted to Cabinet; and 3. Agreed to being updated annually by officers with the latest data and forecasts.
73.	<p>ANNUAL EDUCATION STANDARDS REPORT (PRIOR TO CABINET) <i>(Agenda Item 6)</i></p> <p>Officers presented the Annual Education Standards Report. Officers highlighted that there was work to do on Key Stage Four and Five outcomes; a healthy growth in primary education; and some work to do in early years.</p> <p>Members enquired about the significant increase in good level of development in early years and sought explanations for it. Officers noted that coming of the back of the pandemic, while there was some settling down, schools were working effectively with children in early years. There was also good support from colleagues to support schools. It was noted that outcomes in later years were affected by what happened in early years.</p> <p>Members further noted that for early years, Hillingdon was in line with statistical neighbours and outer London Boroughs, however this was not the case for Key Stage One and Two.</p> <p>The discussion shifted to Key Stage 4 and 5 outcomes, with Members noting the challenges faced, especially in comparison to statistical neighbours and outer London boroughs. Members raised questions regarding the efforts to address these challenges, noting the role of the Regional Schools Commissioner. Officers noted school-to-school support and peer support with schools which was an ongoing strategy. Officers highlighted the Hillingdon Secondary Headteachers Association as an active tool of disseminating best practise. There were also conversations ongoing with colleagues in the academy sector. It may also be that the instability of the previous few years was now appearing in Key Stage 4 and 5, and mental health of young people was an overarching consideration. There appeared to be a trend whereby early years showed a high level of achievement which did not translate to later years. This was something that officers were aware of.</p> <p>Officers noted that the differences between Hillingdon and statistical neighbours in Key Stages 1, 2 and 4 were minimal. Progress was being made on this and it was hoped that this progress would feed into Key Stage 5 as cohorts moved through the system.</p> <p>Members asked about schools that 'required improvement' and sought clarification that these were not the same schools that went down to inadequate. Officers noted that they could come back to Members with this information. It was noted that these were private nurseries.</p>

Members noted the discrepancies between Hillingdon and statistical neighbours and outer London, and asked about course provision and whether sixth formers can access the right courses for their skills. This was something that was constantly under review. There was a blend of academic with vocational opportunities for children. This was crucial because that was about intrinsic motivation and a desire to learn. Members raised the possibility of comparing students based on value added.

Members referred to exclusions and suspensions and asked if there was a bias or over-representation in exclusions and suspensions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds or certain ethnic backgrounds. Officers would be able to provide this outside of the meeting.

Members further asked if there was anything in place in terms of 'near-misses' of permanent exclusions. Officers noted that they were developing the data set on exclusions and working with students on the road to exclusion so that they do not get excluded. Officers were working with roughly 30 children at any one time on this. Furthermore, officers were trying to capture data on exclusions that were retracted and were supporting schools with alternatives to exclusions.

Members emphasised the progress in good and outstanding schools over the last decade nationally.

Members expressed discomfort with comparing Hillingdon with statistical neighbours, considering factors such as the presence of Heathrow Airport and the number of transient pupils. Officers noted that comparisons to statistical neighbours, London and national data all gave different perspectives and so were good for benchmarking. Also, it was important for Hillingdon to compare to itself to ensure progress and improvements. It was noted that the Hillingdon Learning Partnership helped to shape the direction of travel.

Referring to SEND casework, Members raised concerns over the drop in the percentage of completing assessments and issuing EHCPs within 20 weeks from 2021 onwards. Members asked if things had improved since then. This was something that was being worked on. Current levels were similar to those stated in the report.

Members asked about closing the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. This would be a key part of the Education Strategy. It was important to note the 'disadvantaged' covered a broad spectrum. Working with schools as partners would be a key part of this. Further to this, Members asked if children with disadvantages were particularly hit by the pandemic. Officers highlighted the recovery curriculum that was put in place post-pandemic, noting that this may not have had the desired outcome as there was security in pre-pandemic routine. It was noted that with the increase in challenging behaviour exhibited by young people, that the true impact of the pandemic was now being shown.

Members noted that it was good that Hillingdon had one trained mental health professional in each school. Mental health was vital for both students and staff in school.

Members noted declining numbers of child minders in early years and high turnover rates. Officers noted that there was an issue around appropriate staffing in early years and the way early years was perceived in an educational environment. Officers noted that the NPQEYL early leadership course was maybe not comparable in terms of content to the senior leadership qualification or headship qualification. There was an issue around training available to staff in early years settings and access to that training.

Members asked about the in-year Fair Access Panel, noting that move-ins to the borough found it difficult getting a nearby school place. Members asked if the Panel was being used more and more for move-ins rather than special cases such as asylum seekers. Officers noted that the Fair Access Panel had clear criteria and so would not be used only for move-ins. Officers further noted that there was a particular challenge around Year 11.

Members asked about interim provision. This was short-term provision for children who arrived in the borough and did not immediately have a school place. This was used flexibly to meet need.

Members noted that they were pleased that officers were looking into how to reduce suspensions.

Members asked about children missing education and what the numbers looked like. Officers noted that the typical average was between 120 and 140 children, which was significantly lower than in previous years. There had been a lot of investment and a lot of work done in this area.

Members asked about mental health and whether the grant from the DfE would continue. Officers noted that this was a one-off grant. When officers were planning, they were looking at what would have the longest-term impact. There were various training schemes for schools around mental health, and mental health underpinned everything in education. There was also good work going on with mental health support teams in schools. Officers noted a project working with CAMHS and health providers, and there were an increasing number of schools having access to this. This was really important because this provided support to children that would not qualify for CAMHS support; therefore this was about trying to meet need in school through professionals that were trained to support those children before needs escalate.

Members referred to the EBSA (emotional based school avoidance) leaflet and asked if Members could have access to this. Officers noted that this could be looked into, and further noted that there was some literature within the Virtual School.

	<p>Members asked what the ‘September Guarantee’ referred to. This was where the Council needed to guarantee that every child in Year 11 had a place in further education when they got to 16 or 18. This was about placement sufficiency and ensuring that children do not end up as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).</p> <p>Members referred to elective home education and asked what ‘philosophical reasons’ for this meant. Officers noted that there were certain schools of thought where some parents can attribute what they want for their children which may differ from the mainstream education pathway.</p> <p>Members asked for a list of acronyms to be included in the final version of the report.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Noted the key findings set out in the report; and 2. Delegated to the Democratic Services Officer in conjunction with the Chair (and in consultation with the Opposition Lead) to agree comments to be submitted to Cabinet.
74.	<p>‘PERSISTENT ABSENTEEISM’ REVIEW – WITNESS SESSION 1 (<i>Agenda Item 7</i>)</p> <p>Officers provided a briefing note with an update regarding the current situation regarding persistent absenteeism in the academic year. The data showed a current absenteeism rate of around 19.5%. While this was slightly lower than the national average of 20.6%, on the current trajectory the figure for the end of the year would be around 26-28%. While this would be higher than desired, this rate would still be an improvement from the previous year's nearly 34%. This meant that there was some initial positive impact of the work that officers had done.</p> <p>Officers planned to delve deeper into the data concerning vulnerable groups of children in the future.</p> <p>There had been several initiatives undertaken since November to address absenteeism, including implementing a revised borough-wide protocol for penalty notices. However, recent changes in government guidance regarding penalties may necessitate further revisions. This showed that what the Committee had chosen as its review topic was being scrutinised nationally.</p> <p>Officers had undertaken EBSA training for team members and lots of colleagues across the Local Authority. This had also been offered to key colleagues in schools.</p> <p>Four members of the Attendance Support team were now doing training for working with children with complex trauma – this was a seven-day training course that took place over six months. This would help officers working with</p>

families with adverse childhood experiences and intergenerational trauma, which was linked to potential persistent absenteeism.

Attendance hubs in Hillingdon had been launched. These were also known as clusters and were located in West Drayton, Hillingdon and Ruislip, with an additional hub planned for later in the academic year. These involved getting clusters of schools together to talk about common issues and to think about how to tackle them together.

A newly recruited project manager worked in the Virtual School looking at work around children with the social worker. This project manager had been recruited for 12 months and was currently in their third month. Officers were also currently advertising for a 12-month education project manager who would focus on attendance. These project managers would help with deep dive analysis which would aid with the review.

Members thanked officers for the briefing note.

Members asked about having some geographical analysis around data on vulnerable cohorts. Members further asked about having some historical analysis around the number and type of penalty notices, and around the size of the attendance team. Officers noted that penalty notices would be a big feature of the report that they would ask the project manager to pull together. Penalty notices could be issued for holidays or for non-attendance. Officers noted that they would be able to pull together a historical picture of this. This was a big part of the issue of persistent absenteeism as Hillingdon issued a lot of particularly holiday penalty notices. Officers would also be able to provide some geographical analysis. The size of the team had remained very similar but its functions had changed. The team was previously called the Participation Team and used to have other functions such as Children Missing Education, tracking children who were Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), and child performance licences. Over the past 18 months, some of these functions had been taken out of this team, which was now solely focused on attendance support.

Members noted that it would be good to understand if fixed penalty notices were effective. Members asked where the penalty notice money went. Officers noted that this money was used to pay for the penalty notice officer who administered all of this work.

Members asked and officers noted that it would be possible to get a summary of the discussions that take place at the attendance hub cluster meetings.

Members referred to children coming back to school after an absence, noting that young people may experience an apprehension in returning to school, which may lead to further absences. Officers noted that there were two main cohorts of persistent absentees, those who were absent for extended periods, who would then need support in reintegration, and a larger group of those who were absent on ad hoc days that built up over time. Members noted that on average a persistent absentee would be absent for one day per fortnight

across the year. Ad hoc absences were more difficult to support as the reasons may be less clearcut.

Members referred to ensuring that penalty notices did not penalise the most vulnerable children or families experiencing difficulties, and asked if consideration of mitigating circumstances was given prior to issuing a penalty notice. Officers noted that within the new Working Together guidance there was the need to consider all of the context around the child and the family situation. It was important to note that the decision to issue a penalty was the school's decision, the Council just acted on their behalf by issuing the penalty. It was possible to hear an appeal in some instances where a parent felt there had been mitigating circumstances or evidence not submitted that should be considered. Ultimately, the decision rested with the head teacher. It was confirmed that there was no use of debt collection, though it was potentially possible to prosecute legally.

Members highlighted the issue of parents taking their children out of school for cheaper holidays and asked how the Council educated parents on the importance of children being in school every day. It was noted that this would form part of the wider government initiative, in that every moment counts. This was related to the decision to increase the fines given via penalty notices as this was a national issue. There had been some instances of parents thinking that it would be cheaper to pay a fine and to go on holiday during term-time, than to go on holiday outside of term-time. There needed to be a focus on how the Council worked with schools to reiterate that every day counts, both in terms of the educational impact but also on the social impact.

Members asked about the percentage of fines paid to not paid. Officers noted that they could supply this information outside of the meeting.

Members asked if there was a programme of engagement with parents and an education of parents around the importance of children being in school. Officers noted that there was, but it was individualised to each school and what was relevant to their families. Every school can take a child and their parents to the attendance panel process, this was a supportive mechanism where the attendance support officer would meet with the child and family and with the school to try to uncover the issues and barriers and work together to address those issues. An agreement would then be made such as to provide training or to refer to external partners such as Brilliant Parents to get support for the parents as well as the child. Members asked whether there was a need for more generalised support, linking this to intergenerational deprivation and parents who may have missed out on education themselves. Officers noted that it was difficult to influence change in parents' mindsets. What was possible, however, was to interrupt the intergenerational cycle and so the work done with children was important because within school is where there can be an influence, as children are in school for several hours each day. This could potentially be addressed through the clusters as they were location-based. It was also important for different teams within the Council to be on the same page when in contact with schools.

	<p>Members referred to the timeline of witness sessions and asked if there was an update relating to other Local Authorities or schools as potential witnesses. Members noted that June/ July may not be a suitable time for school representatives to attend a witness session. It was noted that this would be ongoing.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Committee asked questions of officers as part of its review.</p>
75.	<p>MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL (<i>Agenda Item 8</i>)</p> <p>Members considered the minutes of the Corporate Parenting Panel.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the Corporate Parenting Panel were noted.</p>
76.	<p>FORWARD PLAN (<i>Agenda Item 9</i>)</p> <p>The Opposition Lead requested to see the comments that would be made to Cabinet.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families and Education Select Committee noted the Cabinet Forward Plan.</p>
77.	<p>WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 10</i>)</p> <p>Members considered the Work Programme.</p> <p>Members asked for an update on school admissions to be added to the Work Programme for the next meeting. It was requested that this update specifically reflect Year 7 and Reception; any surplus places; and any information on unfilled places, particularly in Year 8 and Year 9.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families and Education Select Committee considered the report and agrees any amendments.</p>
	<p>The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 8.50 pm.</p>

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

The public part of this meeting was filmed live on the Council's YouTube Channel to increase transparency in decision-making, however these minutes remain the official and definitive record of proceedings.