

Minutes

CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE

17 July 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 Kishan Bhatt, Councillor Tony Burles, and Councillor Jan Sweeting (Opposition Lead)</p> <p>Co-Opted Member Present: Tony Little</p> <p>Officers Present: Kat Wyatt (Assistant Director, Prevention and Youth Justice) Nuz Ilyas (Service Manager, Hillingdon Youth Justice Service and AXIS) Alex Coman (Director for Safeguarding, Partnerships and Quality Assurance) Donna Hugh (Safeguarding Manager) Ryan Dell (Democratic Services Officer)</p>
13.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies were received from Councillor Rita Judge with Councillor Tony Burles substituting.</p> <p>Apologies were also received from Councillor Tony Gill.</p>
14.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>None.</p>
15.	<p>MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>Members thanked officers for the minutes and asked that the evidence from the witnesses be used when compiling the final review report.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the previous meeting be agreed.</p>
16.	<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>

17.

YOUTH JUSTICE STRATEGY 2024-2029 (*Agenda Item 5*)

Officers introduced the Hillingdon Youth Justice Services' draft five-year strategy.

The strategy contained five priorities:

- **Priority One – Prevention and Early Intervention:** This sought to build on the provision currently in place and the aim was to intervene at the earliest possible stage to prevent escalation and children entering the criminal justice system. This meant exploring and understanding the root causes of offending by exploring the wider determinants of social inequality. The number of first-time entrants had decreased over the COVID pandemic. It had now started to rise but had remained below pre-pandemic levels. The rate remained below both national and London averages. Officers wanted to build on successes in the rate of engagement in children consenting to accessing support and intervention at an earlier stage. This meant continuing to develop the AXIS service and ensuring children were identified and supported at the earliest opportunity.
- **Priority Two – Over-representation and Disproportionality:** The goal was to address disparities and create a system that treated all children equally. Data showed that black and mixed heritage children were over-represented in the criminal justice system. A disproportionality action plan would be produced to support this priority and provide increased provisions for children with protected characteristics. Officers also wanted to increase the trust in the justice system among children, families and the wider community by listening to their experiences and providing opportunities for active participation.
- **Priority Three – Child-Centred Practice:** The focus was on the holistic needs of children to promote health, well-being, and development to promote positive outcomes. A lot of work had been done to ensure practitioners used an interpersonal approach when working with children and understand their life experiences and how this forms part of their identity. The aim was to increase active participation and co-production with children so that they were actively involved in decisions about how services were delivered.
- **Priority Four – Reducing Re-offending:** The aim was to use a trauma-informed approach to prevent re-offending. The re-offending rate for the period 2021-2022 had decreased, with a true re-offending rate of 32.8%, which was slightly above the national average and below the London average. It was noted that as there was a small cohort of children entering the criminal justice system in Hillingdon, it only took a small increase in offending to impact the percentage change. There had been a reduction in children being remanded in youth detention, which was very positive. There had been zero children receiving a custodial sentence for three consecutive quarters. Work with partners continued to ensure that children were not experiencing a cliff-edge when they reached the age of 18.

- Priority Five – Victims and Restorative Justice: The focus was on the needs of victims, giving them a voice and an active role in the justice system. A lot of work had been done to increase the offer to victims and to be innovative and creative in the opportunities for children to repair the harm that they had caused. The restorative justice offer had also extended to schools and care homes to ensure that colleagues were supported to manage behaviour and incidents in a positive way. The percentage of victims consenting to restorative justice had increased.

Members thanked officers for the child-friendly version of the strategy, which had been co-produced by young people, and asked about the locality-based approach in delivering services and interventions to children within their context, and what this looked like in practice. Officers explained the locality-based approach as seeing children in their own environment, including home, community, and schools.

Members raised a concern about the timing of the consultation period, which straddled the school summer holidays, potentially affecting responses from schools. Officers assured that the timing for the consultation was considered and that schools and education providers had had an opportunity to engage in the consultation process. There had been a lot of responses coming in from schools.

Members questioned the financial implications of the strategy as it came with no additional financing costs, particularly in light of potential increases in youth offending, potential pressures on remand accommodation, and potential reductions in grant funding. Officers explained that they had various funding streams including grants from the Youth Justice Board and were not expecting a reduction in funding at this time. However, they were mindful of changes in expenditure, particularly with regards to remand costs.

Members asked for clarification on the term “living in poverty” and its implications. Officers defined “living in poverty” in terms of children’s experiences, including the cost-of-living crisis and access to basic necessities.

Members raised a question about the increase in burglary and whether it was connected to poverty. It was noted that all 19 offences were committed by two young people. Officers acknowledged the issue and explained that they took an individualistic approach to each child and family to understand the causes of the offending behaviour.

Members asked about the expected changes as a result of the strategy. Officers expressed the aim to continue the work they were already doing, celebrate their successes, and ensure they were continuing in the right pathway. This was about ensuring a clear direction of travel not only for children themselves but the wider community.

Members inquired about the increase in gang culture and if it was localised to any specific part of the borough. Officers acknowledged the existence of gang culture and explained that they had a unique service, the AXIS service, which sought to gain intelligence and data regarding serious violence and exploitation. Officers added that they had a clear understanding of what was going on around violence among young people, and they were working not just within the Council but with their partners such as the Safeguarding Partnership and the community to identify the reasons and start addressing them.

Members asked about the delivery of the programme locally within locality-based family hubs, particularly in areas like Heathrow Villages, which lacked such facilities. Officers assured that they are constantly thinking about creative and innovative ways to reach children in areas where they did not have family hubs, including supporting transport links to and from the localities.

Members asked if audits to the strategy would be a regular item on the work programme. Officers confirmed that it had been recommended that this came back on an annual basis.

Members asked about Project Turnaround and what it involved. Officers explained that Project Turnaround was a Ministry of Justice-funded project (the funding ended in March 2025) aimed at working with children at the earliest opportunity before they entered the criminal justice system. The data showed that those children that did work with the Turnaround officer were less likely to enter the criminal justice system.

Members asked about the Council's collaboration with schools, community organisations, and other agencies to prevent youth offending. Officers highlighted their multi-agency service and their work with various partners, including schools, social care, probation, and custodial establishments.

Members asked if there was any support from the Mayor of London. Officers confirmed that the Mayor of London currently funded some of their work in the prevention area. Officers added that they have received grant funding to put together a bespoke programme for children engaged in serious youth violence, particularly around their mental health and well-being. Officers confirmed that the AXIS programme was funded through the local Crime Partnership Fund, which came directly from the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC). There was also the Engage project which worked directly with young people in custody suites. Hillingdon was the host of a tri-borough programme funded by MOPAC.

In terms of resources, Hillingdon was well-resourced in terms of police colleagues and health colleagues. There was a speech and language therapist and part-time CAMHS officer.

Members asked if there were any lasting disruptions from the COVID pandemic. Officers acknowledged the impact of COVID, particularly on

children's social communication skills. Where children had not entered school, they missed out on socialising with other children. Officers were also aware of emotional well-being and mental health, considering children's lived experiences in relation to the support that could be offered. Officers added that they had seen an increase in children accessing their mental health services on the back of COVID. Every child that entered the service had a speech and language assessment. Officers had been working with colleagues in the Integrated Care Board to look at how to provide a bespoke response to children who were engaged in serious youth violence, particularly around mental health. Through this collaboration some grant funding had been received.

Members asked about the strategy's specific targeting of areas with high percentages of children in poverty to provide early intervention measures. Officers highlighted their collaboration with partners internally and externally to support families living in poverty. This included early health, stronger families, education and health were thinking creatively about how to support families living in poverty.

Members congratulated officers on the average of 31% of children consenting to receive intervention and asked about the remaining percentage who did not take up the intervention. Officers explained that some children may decline due to lack of trust in the system or simply choosing not to, but young people can contact the service at any time for support.

Members asked about victims meeting with the young people who had committed the crimes against them. Officers referred to Priority 5 – Victims and Restorative Justice. There was the chance offered to have a restorative justice conference where the children and the victim have an opportunity to have a conversation and understand how the victim was impacted by the harm caused.

Members asked about the numbers of young people engaged in organised crime; how young people may be getting involved in this; and whether there were family links. Officers highlighted that family links to organised crime did exist across London and nationally. Officers took an individualistic approach to each child and each family to ensure that they were understanding the causes of the offending behaviour and working not only with the child but with the wider family unit.

Members asked about over-representation in the youth justice system and noted the production of a disproportionality action plan. Officers noted that the Youth Justice Partnership Board was currently working to put together the action plan. Updates would be provided on the Strategy, including the action plan, to the Committee yearly.

Members referred to the 'Walking in our Shoes' training delivered by young people and commended the Youth Justice edition. Members asked if it was appropriate to share this with Members of the Committee or all Elected

	<p>Members. Officers agreed to take the suggestion back for consideration, depending on the children involved in the programme.</p> <p>Members asked about the issue of accommodation in the borough and its impact on the youth justice system. Officers explained their robust process for planning for children to be in the community from the minute they entered custody and their work with social care to prevent multiple moves for children.</p> <p>Members noted that the Committee’s comments to Cabinet could include a request for the final report to have more detail on comparisons to neighbouring boroughs. Officers noted that they were sharing good practise with partners in other local authorities such as on restorative justice and widening this out to schools and care homes. Other local authorities had approached Hillingdon to learn from them.</p> <p>When children came back into the community after being in a custodial establishment, there was a robust process in place. It was ensured that there was an address available six weeks prior to their release to allow officers to plan around access to health and education. For looked after children, officers worked closely with colleagues in social care to support the staff and child where it was foreseen that there could be a breakdown in placement. Some restorative justice training was delivered to care homes. It was important that there was the same engagement for children where the Council was corporate parent.</p> <p>Members noted the officers continued to deliver transitions work without a seconded probation officer. Officers noted that they worked in collaboration with the probation team, although probation were experiencing some staffing issues so they could not second an officer at this time. In the interim it was ensured that there was a member of staff who was focused on transitions. It was important to think about each individual child that was turning 18 to make sure they had the right support plan. Once they had transitioned to probation, officers did keep in touch and had services available to continue support.</p> <p>The Committee’s comments to Cabinet would be delegated. Members asked that the action plan be referred to in the comments.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families and Education Select Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Noted the Draft Youth Justice Strategy; 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
18.	<p>‘PERSISTENT ABSENTEEISM’ REVIEW – WTINESS SESSION 5 (Agenda Item 6)</p>

The Chair outlined that the Committee was undertaking a review into persistent absenteeism. The purpose of this session was to discover how young people were protected and safeguarded, especially if they were not attending school regularly.

Officers started the discussion by emphasising the importance of education as a safeguarding element, as school was likely the safest place to be for young people. This was because as well as education there would be the child's support network, friends, tutors and teachers. Officers highlighted the importance of consistent relationships in schools and the role of teachers and mentors. They also noted the importance of giving children a voice in their child protection plans, reviews and conferences. The child's input formed part of the plan. There were various mechanisms of engagement, for example if a child was non-verbal. Children were also offered the opportunity to speak to the conference Chair and have the opportunity for an advocate to speak at the conference on their behalf. This applied to children with child protection plans and those with looked after plans.

Officers worked very closely with their colleagues from the Virtual School, which provided intensive support for children who were looked after and enhanced support for every child who had a social worker. They also worked closely with the child protection advisors who Chair the conferences. There was a focus on the safeguarding element of school attendance and how this can strengthen a child's support network.

Officers discussed the collaboration with Designated Safeguarding Leads in schools and officers who managed and arranged the cluster groups. They have attended two cluster group sessions so far and would be attending one in September with a focus on addressing absenteeism among children on a child protection plan. The cluster groups had been positive and had helped implement strategies and understand the different perspectives between children's social care and schools. There was good collaboration between social care and schools and the Virtual School played an important role in bridging the gap between the two.

Officers emphasised the importance of education as a safeguarding element and the role of consistent relationships in schools. During school holidays a designated lead would be available for child protection conferences in order to contribute to the education plan. This ensured consistency in approach.

Members noted the close work with Designated Safeguarding Leads in schools and asked about their receptiveness and involvement. Officers noted that the safeguarding leads had been appreciative and receptive. They asked questions about addressing school attendance and what they needed to be aware of when attending conferences. They also discussed the incentives provided to children for good attendance. Presentations were also uploaded to the LEAP website. Officers added that the child protection forums and cluster groups had been well established and run by the local authority. They provided training and address recurring issues like school exclusion and absenteeism.

The role of safeguarding in schools was recognised by the Safeguarding Children's Partnership Board.

Members noted that this review may be the most comprehensive and difficult review that had ever been done as there were so many strands to bring together, and there was the challenge of synthesising all the information. Members asked for recommendation examples from the professionals.

Officers commended the AXIS programme for collating valuable information.

Officers commended good collaboration among multi-agency partnerships. Young people and their families were an important part of this partnership.

Officers highlighted that there was a good joined-up approach between social care, the Virtual School and SEND, bringing together all of their expertise.

When asked about things that had not worked well, officers noted that everything that officers were doing was addressing a need. Officers noted the scoping report of the review, which referred to poverty, mental health, domestic abuse, violence and COVID. All strategies, such as the contextual safeguarding strategy, were to address a need.

Officers were rolling out trauma-informed practice across the social care. For example, the impact of COVID was long-lasting and so trauma-informed practice was important. There was a good learning and development programme to provide training across partners. The LEAP website had a lot of information and so did the safeguarding partnership website.

One of the priorities of the Board was around contextual safeguarding. This included consideration of engagement in crime or gangs. Also considered was safeguarding in education. There was a sub-group that reported to the Safeguarding Partnership Board that looked at how schools, police, health, social care and youth justice all worked together to address issues and how schools, parents and young people can be supported. This linked to the contextual safeguarding strategy which was published on the website.

Whenever there were discussions around strategies, working together plans, joint plans, child protection plans, schools were always involved. DSLs were seeking officer support where necessary.

Officers discussed the strategies in place, focusing on the importance of relationships and trust and noted the use of trauma-informed practice across social care.

Members asked for more information on trauma-informed practice. Officers agreed to send more information on trauma-informed practice. This had only recently been rolled out and was a project that would cover a year and a half. It was noted that building relationships was important. If children could not attend the conferences, officers would send them a letter to explain what had

happened at the conference and they would be encouraged to attend the next time.

Members asked how individualised work for each child was ensured with limited resources. Officers emphasised the importance of individualised plans, empowering children and families, and ensuring they were part of the conversation. Individualised work was important to ensure it was relevant to the child. In addition to this there were patterns and trends at the strategic level. Every child protection plan was written by the social workers and Child Protection Chair and was individualised. The conference looked at that child's needs; looked at that family situation; and looked at the context in which the child lives and grows and develops.

It was noted that some concerns were similar such as mental health, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol, housing issues and isolation. Despite this, children's experiences of these were individual.

Child protection plans were family plans in that the child and family were involved in contributing to the plan. This empowered families and children to know that their input was important.

Members asked about key safeguarding indicators for new persistent absenteeism. Officers noted that for them it was the other way round. They will see safeguarding concerns and then attendance may be a contributing factor. There were two levels of need, one was under section 17 of the Children's Act and referred to a child in need of support where a need was not being met. The Local Authority try to intervene as a statutory service to support a family and to meet that need. The next level was a child in need of protection. This related to section 47 of the Children's Act and the child is in need of protection because they are at risk of significant harm. This is where everything has a clear legal definition. Quite often for children who are at risk of significant harm and therefore require a child protection plan, education, absence and exclusions are a factor in their lives and this was why schools play a vital role. Sometimes social workers or schools will pick up patterns, for example if a child was late to school every Monday. There was a programme called Operation Encompass in partnership with the police. If the police were contacted overnight or at the weekend for a domestic abuse incident, they will notify the school of the child. There was a domestic abuse advisor to schools within the service who would support the school with this. There were currently roughly four schools in the borough who were not part of Operation Encompass and this was credit to the Domestic Abuse Education Officer for getting schools onboard. If schools started to pick up patterns they could contact social care. This could lead to a statutory intervention which could lead to an assessment. This assessment may say that the child is in need of support via section 17. There would be a plan put in place to support the family. A strategy discussion, attended by police, health, education and social care, may suggest that a section 47 investigation is needed. If the risk of harm was confirmed then there would be a child protection conference.

Members asked about parental barriers and how to break down any resistance. Officers noted that a lot of parents that were brought to their attention did struggle in regard to education. There may be a language barrier. Sometimes there may not be an understanding that school can be a safe place and can be a positive experience for their children. There may be families for whom education was not the priority and were more concerned about getting food on the table or ensuring that children were not exposed to a violent partner. There were also parents who were very keen to get their children into school but the children are not keen.

Members asked about the use of technology to monitor and address absenteeism and allow remote learning for children who are absent for legitimate reasons. Officers discussed the use of technology to monitor attendance patterns and noted that technology is used for virtual meetings and training. Schools did have a good system in relation to using technology to monitoring attendance and trends and having follow ups with parents. Since the COVID pandemic, schools were more aware of providing flexible learning for those children who are not able to attend school, via apps for example. Schools were quite open to work with officers in providing laptops for children so that they can attend school. Schools were coming a long way in providing flexible learning and using technology. There were children who may be anxious as a result of COVID and so being in a large classroom was a struggle and technology could help with this.

There were three child protection suites at the Civic Centre fitted with audio-visual equipment. The Virtual School was conducting weekly virtual sessions where professionals like social workers or DSLs can attend to speak to a virtual school specialist about school attendance; about how to encourage parents; how to support children.

Members asked if there was a one stop hub for good practise to be shared with partners. Officers noted that there were various websites where best practise and training were published on, for example, how to engage with children, how to work on absence, how to prevent exclusions. Communication with schools was done via the LEAP website. Officers worked well with DSLs and with headteachers. There was a lot of information about the safeguarding partnership. It was noted that this may be a question for education colleagues. Members noted that this could be a recommendation of the review.

Members asked about parents' attendance, especially younger parents and links to their children's attendance. It was possible to track parents' attendance if parents were previously looked after children. This could be tracked within the Virtual School. Parents could access this information via the Oracle system. Schools may also hold historical data if parents were known to the school, which can be a good source of information for social workers to consider when they were doing assessments. Health colleagues may also have historical information. Historical data can help to predict current situations.

	<p>Officers noted that when individual assessments of children were undertaken, the wider family circumstance was considered. This may be the reason that children cannot attend school. It was important to have the right support in place to empower families and help them to meet the needs of the child.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families and Education Select Committee met with officers and asked questions pertaining to the review</p>
19.	<p>FORWARD PLAN (<i>Agenda Item 7</i>)</p> <p>Members considered the Forward Plan.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Children, Families and Education Select Committee noted the Cabinet Forward Plan.</p>
20.	<p>WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 8</i>)</p> <p>Members considered the Work Programme.</p> <p>Officers advised that the SEND Sufficiency Strategy had been rescheduled from September to November 2024.</p> <p>The witness session with young people would take place on 15 August 2024 from 17:30-18:30.</p> <p>Members noted the provisional date of November 2024 for an update on the Youth Offer Delivery Model. This would be confirmed.</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 8.35 pm.</p>

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

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