



Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission held on Wednesday 3 December 2025 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Cassandra Brown (Chair)
Councillor Rachel Bentley (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Youcef Hassaine
Alie Kallon (Co-opted Member)
Claire Williams (Co-opted Member)

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT:

Councillor Jasmine Ali

OFFICER SUPPORT:

Amit Alva, Scrutiny Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Irina von Wiese, Councillor Margy Newens, Councillor John Hartley, Councillor Mohamed Deen and Co-opted members Martin Brecknell and Mannah Kargbo.

2. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT

There were no items of business which the Chair deemed urgent.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS.

There were no disclosures of interests or dispensations in respect of any items of business on the agenda.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 October 2025 were approved as a correct record.

5. CABINET MEMBER INTERVIEW - CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND REFUGEES

The commission received a presentation and updates from Councillor Jasmine Ali, Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Refugees, accompanied by officer, Alastair [Director of Children's Services], on topics under the cabinet member portfolio.

Councillor Ali outlined her leadership vision for children's services within the borough, aligned with the Southwark 2030 vision for residents and communities, with a particular emphasis on:

- Giving children and young people a good start in life and a great childhood that builds a solid foundation for adulthood.
- Responding to the continued impacts of Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis on family life, child development and mental health.
- Ensuring that children and young people, especially those facing disadvantage, receive excellent services from the council and its partners.

Councillor Ali also highlighted that the administration's approach remains rooted in early help and prevention, robust safeguarding, and ensuring that no child "falls through the gaps" of the system.

Councillor Ali thanked the commission and the Chair for their work on the recent review of Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) processes, including members' direct observation of EHCP practice and recommendations, noting that most of the commission's recommendations have been accepted and will be embedded in practice.

Councillor Ali further spoke about SEND and EHCP's in Southwark

- High demand for EHCPs in Southwark, with rates above the national average.
- Improved timeliness of EHCP completion since the commission's previous review, though demand and complexity remain high.
- Continued focus on evidence-based, preventative approaches in early years.
- Southwark's permanent exclusion rate is the 14th lowest in the country, approximately a quarter of the national rate, but there is no complacency and work continues to reduce exclusions further.
- A listening project has been undertaken with around 20 families and children who have experienced exclusion, with findings being grouped into typologies to preserve anonymity and to inform policy and practice change.

- An increasing recognition by schools that they must respond to need rather than waiting for formal diagnosis (e.g. autism, ADHD, broader neurodivergence), particularly in the wake of Covid-19, to avoid behaviour-only responses to emerging SEND needs.

Councillor Ali emphasised that many exclusion cases are linked to unmet or emerging SEND rather than “bad behaviour”, and explained that headteachers had responded constructively when presented with family experiences from the listening project

The commission heard that the council is actively building capacity in SEND provision, including:

- Repurposing school buildings and spaces where there are falling rolls to increase SEND places.
- Expanding existing SEND provision in schools.
- A recently agreed £5.7m investment in Ivydale Primary School to make the older building more suitable for the current cohort, and to adapt the newer building specifically for SEND provision.
- Growth of the SEND Children and Family Hub to support families earlier and more holistically.

Councillor Ali reported on the recent Annual Standards Report to Cabinet, which showed:

- 99% of Southwark schools are judged good or outstanding by Ofsted, including 100% of special schools.
- Strong outcomes at GCSE and A-level, and exceptional achievements for children in care and pupils with SEND.

The commission also heard that the significant journey from Southwark’s historic position near the bottom of national league tables to being among the strongest performing areas in London and nationally.

The commission was updated on the Keeping Education Strong strategy:

- The borough has experienced a significant fall in birth rates and high levels of families moving out of London, compounded during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Working collaboratively with schools, the council has now concluded the programme of reducing school places and closures to stabilise the system, ensuring schools remain financially viable and quality is maintained.
- Decisions were taken by agreement with schools and academy trusts,

guided by data on pupil numbers and local need.

- A local secondary school (a non-council-run academy) has decided to close following DfE processes, with plans to teach through examination years and work with nearby schools to support affected pupils.

Councillor Ali explained that further demographic trends will need to be monitored, particularly in relation to housebuilding and any future recovery in birth rates. The commission then heard from Councillor Ali and the Director of Children's Services regarding children's social care and corporate parenting:

- The number of children in care has been reduced and is now more in line with similar London boroughs.
- However, a greater proportion of children in care are teenagers, with increasingly complex needs, presenting practice, provision and cost challenges.
- Education outcomes for children in care are stronger than London comparators, including examples of care leavers progressing into higher education and employment.
- The children's placements market is described as "broken", with heavy reliance on private, for-profit providers. This has historically led to more out-of-borough and out-of-London placements, which the council is now working to reduce.
- Southwark has opened Olive House, a council-owned and run children's home, in July 2025, and is renewing its sufficiency strategy to increase local, high-quality placements.

The commission heard that the placement sufficiency strategy for children and care leavers is being refreshed, with oversight from the Corporate Parenting Committee and cross-council engagement, including the Cabinet Member for Jobs and local economy colleagues.

Councillor Ali referred to wider safeguarding and early help arrangements, noting that:

- While the number of children subject to child protection plans has decreased to a more appropriate level, overall child protection activity remains high, reflecting continued pressures and complexity.
- Southwark's network of former Sure Start centres has been defended and repurposed as Children and Family Hubs, providing a strong base for integrated early help.

Family Hubs have been planned based on 20-minute walking distances and 15-minute public transport journeys, and are concentrated in areas of higher

deprivation, in line with residents' feedback and need.

Councillor Ali referred to wider safeguarding and early help arrangements, noting that:

- While the number of children subject to child protection plans has decreased to a more appropriate level, overall child protection activity remains high, reflecting continued pressures and complexity.
- Southwark's network of former Sure Start centres has been defended and repurposed as Children and Family Hubs, providing a strong base for integrated early help.

Family Hubs have been planned based on 20-minute walking distances and 15-minute public transport journeys, and are concentrated in areas of higher deprivation, in line with residents' feedback and need.

The commission heard brief updates on:

- The Schools Climate Network, with 35 schools registered and participating in climate action projects, including exemplar work showcased at the GLA by a local amalgamated school.
- The Southwark Scholarship Scheme, established in 2011, which has supported 148 young people into higher education (including at Oxford, Cambridge, LSE, King's and other universities) who might otherwise not have been able to take up places. Due to cost pressures the scheme has been scaled back from earlier cohorts of 25 scholars per year but has been maintained at a reduced level to preserve the offer for the future.

Councillor Ali also highlighted:

- Extension of free healthy school meals to secondary pupils in Southwark ahead of national policy changes, and the rollout of breakfast programmes in partnership with government initiatives.
- Work to secure and utilise DCMS funding for youth services, including capital investment in youth centres and adventure playgrounds, and work with the Youth Parliament and young advisors.
- Advocacy at national level, including submissions to the Education Committee on SEND, work with the Poverty Strategy Commission calling for the removal of the two-child benefit cap, and contributions to recent national policy shifts which will lift significant numbers of children out of poverty.

The commission was informed that Southwark has now launched as a Borough of Sanctuary, with:

- A published plan for year one and year two of activity.
- A public statement expressing concern about national proposals such as extended 20-year routes to settlement and restrictions on family reunification, given Southwark's position as one of the boroughs with the

third-highest rate of refugees.

- Ongoing work to ensure refugees and asylum seekers can access education, support and community opportunities.

Commission members asked questions and raised issues on the following themes:

- Link between SEND and exclusions:
 - Members requested statistical breakdowns of exclusions relating to pupils with SEND, and further information on the “need not diagnosis” approach, including formal definitions and operational guidance.
- EHCP delays and assessment processes:
 - Officers explained the multi-agency nature of EHCP assessments (education, health and care) and the national context of long waits for diagnosis, particularly for autism, with local efforts focused on earlier, needs-led support in schools to avoid dependence on diagnosis alone.
 - The commission noted the importance of the council’s free mental health drop-in and early intervention offers.
- Care leavers’ employability pathway:
 - Members asked about the care leavers employability pathway, success measures and links to wider employment schemes. Officers and Councillor Ali highlighted recent work with the Connect to Work and Southwark Works programmes, guaranteed interviews for care leavers who meet minimum criteria, and co-design with care experienced young people.
- Secondary school closure and future risk:
 - Members sought clarity on the planned closure of a local secondary academy, numbers affected and contingency planning, as well as any indication that other secondaries might follow. Officers confirmed ongoing system-wide dialogue via SASH (Southwark Association of Secondary Heads) and emphasised a collaborative approach.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and Director for the update and noted that the commission would return to several themes in its final report, particularly SEND, exclusions, poverty and youth opportunities.

6. SOUTHWARK SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP (SSCP)

The commission then received a presentation from Alastair [Director of Children’s Services], in his capacity as current Chair of the Southwark Safeguarding Children Partnership (SSCP), on the 2024–25 Annual Report and safeguarding arrangements.

Alasdair outlined the partnership arrangements, including:

- The statutory partnership between Local Authority, Police and Health leaders, with the role of Chair rotating annually between these agencies.
- Key sub-groups, including:
 - Learning Network – disseminating learning from reviews and audits, refreshed with strong public health input.
 - Child Safeguarding Practice Review (CSPR) Sub-group – considering serious incidents and determining learning and review activity in line with statutory guidance.
 - Quality and Effectiveness Sub-group – the “engine room” of the partnership, scrutinising performance data, audits and practice.
 - MACE (Multi-Agency Child Exploitation) arrangements – focusing on extra-familial risks, including criminal and sexual exploitation.
 - MASH Strategic Partnership Board – overseeing the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), which acts as the front door for referrals.

The commission’s attention was drawn to key data in the report (Section 6), including:

- A lower number of children subject to child protection plans than historically, now closer to statistical neighbours.
- However, high levels of child protection activity overall, particularly Section 47 enquiries:
 - A local rate of 262 per 10,000 children, compared with 225 for statistical neighbours, 172 for London and 187 for England.
- The need to balance proactive safeguarding with respect for family life and proportionality, acknowledging that intrusive involvement must be justified and ethical.

Alasdair highlighted several areas of focus for the partnership:

- Neglect:
 - Neglect remains one of the largest categories for children on child protection plans.
 - The partnership has developed a neglect strategy, shaped by learning from Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, to better distinguish between poverty-related hardship and neglect, and to ensure families receive support rather than punitive responses where appropriate.
- Domestic abuse:
 - Ongoing work to strengthen the multi-agency response and to learn from serious incidents.
- Child safeguarding practice reviews:
 - Rapid learning from cases, such as the review related to “Child H”, with an emphasis on disseminating learning early rather than waiting for long reports.

The partnership has increased engagement with schools and education, recognising:

- The critical role of attendance data, suspensions and exclusions in identifying safeguarding risks.
- The complexity of coordinating with a diverse group of schools and academy trusts, and the steps taken to involve them systematically in the SSCP Executive and sub-groups.

The commission heard that the partnership intends to focus on Awaab's Law and the implications of new statutory duties regarding:

- Damp, mould, overcrowding and disrepair in homes where children live.
- The need for a stronger multi-agency response when poor housing conditions contribute to risk, including clarity about responsibilities and escalation pathways for professionals in and out of the home.

Members asked questions and raised the following points:

- The need for clearer data and trend information in the annual report, particularly around the areas of focus (neglect, sexual abuse and housing-related risks).
- Interest in whether data can link housing conditions, overcrowding and poverty to children becoming subject to child protection plans, recognising that housing factors may sit beneath headline categories like domestic abuse or neglect.
- The potential for overcrowding and poor housing to exacerbate family stress, domestic conflict and safeguarding concerns, even where there are strong familial love and commitment.

Alasdair agreed with the commission to:

- Explore what data is available regarding housing conditions and safeguarding, and to share further analysis with the commission where possible.
- Facilitate engagement with frontline social workers, parent peer advocates and children in care councils (Speakerbox), so the commission can hear directly from those with lived and practice experience of the safeguarding system.

The commission welcomed these proposals and indicated an interest in visiting services (as it previously had with the EHCP service) to inform further scrutiny.

7. CONNECT TO WORK PROGRAMME

The commission then received a presentation from Nick Wolfe, Employment and

Skills Manager, and Kim Weatherston, Principal Programme Officer for Supported Employment, on the Connect to Work programme and its role in supporting residents with health and disability barriers into sustainable employment.

Officers explained that:

- Connect to Work is a 12-month, voluntary, supported employment programme, funded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) as part of the national Get Britain Working strategy.
- The programme supports Southwark residents who:
 - Have long-term health conditions or disabilities.
 - Are economically inactive; and/or
 - Are in work but at risk of falling out due to health or disability.
- The programme is designed for local delivery, tailored to community needs and the borough labour market, with an emphasis on integration with health, housing and social care services.
- In London, delivery is devolved via Central London Forward (CLF). Southwark is expected to have among the highest participation, with around 700 starts per year and over 2,000 residents supported over five years, and £8.3m allocated to Southwark's delivery up to March 2030.

The commission noted the link to the Director of Public Health's recent annual report on employment and health, highlighting the impact of worklessness on physical and mental health.

Connect to Work is open to Southwark residents aged 18+ with the right to live and work in the UK and not on other DWP-funded programmes (e.g. Restart, Work and Health Programme). The commission was informed that:

- The programme can support some residents with no recourse to public funds, where they can demonstrate their right to work.
- Priority groups include:
 - Carers and ex-carers;
 - People experiencing homelessness or in temporary accommodation;
 - Care leavers;
 - Refugees and resettled communities (Afghan, Ukrainian);
 - Survivors of domestic abuse and modern slavery;
 - People with substance misuse issues;
 - Young people at risk of crime and gangs;
 - Ex-offenders;
 - Members and veterans of the armed forces.

The programme uses two evidence-based models:

- Individual Placement and Support (IPS):
 - Focuses on residents out of work with health conditions, closely integrated with health professionals (e.g. GPs, primary care networks, South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust).
 - Prioritises rapid job search based on what the person wants to do,

- with on-going in-work support and health input.
- Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF):
 - Focused on residents with learning disabilities and neurodivergent conditions.
 - Smaller caseloads and intensive support, including workplace visits and employer coaching on reasonable adjustments, Access to Work and inclusive practice.

Approximately 75% of participants are expected to join the IPS strand and 25% the SEQF strand.

Each participant works with a dedicated Employment Specialist for up to 12 months and while in work. The support offer includes:

- Vocational profiling (including daily routines, strengths and aspirations, not just past employment history).
- CV development, interview preparation and targeted job search based on the resident's preferences.
- Financial coaching and benefit calculations early in the programme, including:
 - Modelling part-time and full-time hours;
 - Childcare support;
 - Impacts on Universal Credit, PIP and other benefits.
- Joint meetings with family members where appropriate, particularly for younger adults living at home, to improve understanding of how work interacts with benefits and reduce anxiety about losing income.
- A “zero exclusion” policy: residents who are not eligible or suitable for Connect to Work are actively signposted to the most appropriate alternative service (e.g. specialist care leaver programmes such as Trailblazers, youth employment projects, or other Southwark Works services).

Officers stressed that the focus is on sustainable, good-quality jobs, not simply “any job”, and that staff challenge employers and systems when opportunities are not accessible or realistic for the individual.

The commission heard about strong and growing integration with:

- Social Prescribing Teams in North and South Southwark – with weekly calls, feedback on referrals, and high referral volumes from this route.
- King's College Hospital MSK community days, where residents on physiotherapy waiting lists are triaged; Connect to Work staff attend, providing employment advice and have successfully engaged older participants (including residents aged 60+).
- Citizens Advice, housing and other community partners.
- Future co-location with health teams and community services in the new Southwark Works hub in Peckham (Peckham Square), where Connect to Work's in-house team will be based alongside other services, enabling a shared, “one-front-door” environment.

The commission was informed that the programme is delivered through:

- In-house Southwark Council team (led by Kim Weatherston) – focusing primarily on residents out of work via the IPS model, closely integrated with health and council teams.
- Commissioned providers:
 - CEK and plus – supporting residents out of work (IPS and SEQF), including those linked to the Southwark Resource Centre, carers services and other social care-aligned provision.
 - BEAM – specialising in residents experiencing homelessness and working through community groups, family hubs and faith groups.
 - JCCS and Careerology – focusing on residents who are in work but at risk of leaving, providing in-work retention support.

Each strand has capped caseloads to maintain quality, and officers are monitoring referral volumes against capacity, with the option to bring forward recruitment or adjust allocation to ensure no resident is turned away unnecessarily.

Although the programme only went live in Southwark in October 2025, officers reported that:

- Southwark has already met or exceeded early targets for:
 - Programme starts.
 - First earnings notifications.
 - Residents achieving initial earnings thresholds (c. £2,000) ahead of schedule.
- Three residents have already secured employment, with more in the pipeline.
- Referrals from social prescribers and MSK clinics have been strong, including older residents (50+), many of whom face age bias and health-related barriers and benefit from targeted support.

Members asked questions and commented on:

- The total number of residents the programme can support across all partners and the management of waiting lists and capacity, particularly given the strong early demand.
- The approach to older workers (50+), including strategies for tackling age discrimination and supporting residents who may lack confidence after long careers or periods out of work.
- Financial literacy for young people and families, and how the programme works with specialist debt and money advice services.
- The new Peckham hub and concerns about the risk of being overwhelmed, given the quality of the offer compared to traditional Jobcentre Plus services.
- How learning and best practice will be shared with other boroughs and nationally to secure future funding and influence wider policy.

The commission noted:

- Officers' commitment to sharing best practice through Central London Forward and with other boroughs, including pilots with large employers (such as revising recruitment processes for residents with health conditions and trial-first approaches).
- The strategic ambition to position Southwark as a demonstration site for devolved, locally-driven employment support, strengthening the case for further devolution and long-term funding.

The commission welcomed the human-centred, integrated design of Connect to Work and indicated that it would revisit this area in future to track outcomes and feed into its recommendations on local economy and employment.

8. WORK PROGRAMME 2025 - 2026

The commission then discussed its work programme for the remainder of the municipal year.

Key points included:

- Two remaining meetings scheduled for 2 February 2026 and 26 February 2026, which are relatively close together due to the forthcoming local elections.
- The commission also discussed intentions to:
 - Hold remaining Cabinet Member interviews with Councillor John Batteson (Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency, Jobs and Business) and Councillor Ellie Cumber (Cabinet Member/Deputy role covering Parks and Culture), subject to confirmation of portfolios.
 - Continue scrutiny of Keeping Education Strong, secondary place planning and links between schools, skills and the local economy.
 - Return to commercial property, high streets and small business support, building on evidence received from the Blue Bermondsey BID and previous discussion of rent reviews, repairs and council-tenant communications.
 - Take forward work on care leavers, youth employment and Southwark Works, including the interface with Connect to Work and corporate parenting responsibilities.

The commission also discussed:

- Draft initial recommendations on the commercial property portfolio and high street item (based on the 6 October meeting) for consideration at a future meeting, including:
 - Pilots between housing and commercial services.
 - Backlog of cases and business experience survey.
 - Improvements to navigation of council processes.

- Greater agility in dealing with small business issues.

Members were invited to send any additional work programme ideas to the Chair, Vice-Chair and Scrutiny Officer by email.

Meeting ended at 9 pm.

CHAIR:

DATED: