



Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission held on Thursday 5 February 2026 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 Irina Von Wiese
Councillor Margy Newens
Alie Kallon (Co-opted Member)
Mannah Kargbo (Co-opted Member)
Claire Williams (Co-opted Member)

**OTHER
MEMBERS
PRESENT:**

**OFFICER
SUPPORT:** Amit Alva, Scrutiny Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Co-opted member Martin Brecknell and Councillor Jon Hartley.

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 interest or dispensations.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 December 2025 were approved as a correct record.

5. INTERVIEW WITH HATS REPRESENTATIVE - PRIVATE PROVIDER OF PATIENT HEALTH CARE, MENTAL HEALTH, HOME TO SCHOOLS FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES (SEND).

The commission first heard from Dan Hardy, Director of Operations for Southeast London, representing HATS- home to school transport for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), delivered in Southwark.

Dan provided an overview of HATS' role and operations, highlighting the following key points:

- Service and operational context
 - HATS provides home-to-school transport for SEND pupils on behalf of Southwark Council, alongside patient transport and mental health transport for the NHS.
 - The home-to-school service is highly time-compressed, with most journeys taking place in a short morning and afternoon window, making the service more operationally pressured than patient transport which is spread across the day.
 - There is a national driver shortage. HATS has mitigated this by upskilled drivers with lower license categories, which has helped stabilise staffing over the last 12 months.
- Relationship with the council and management changes
 - HATS reported that Southwark officers are generally responsive to concerns.
 - A recent change in council management – a new lead officer (Susanna) – has led to better-defined processes and improved communication between HATS and the local authority, which has been well received by HATS staff.

- Complaint and communication improvements
 - HATS recognised that communication with parents and response times to complaints needed improvement.
 - Together with the council, HATS has introduced an internal key performance indicator (KPI) requiring a three-day response to complaints, unless a longer time is needed due to complex investigation (e.g. checking tracking or CCTV).
 - This has contributed to reduced parental anxiety and more timely feedback when concerns are raised.
- Technology – parent app, Cordic and AI-enabled CCTV
 - HATS has deployed a parent app that:
 - Allows parents to log in to see the location of the vehicle
 - Enables HATS to send messages to specific routes (e.g. delays, changes).
 - Some parents have found the app challenging to use. When issues are reported, HATS now calls parents back, talks through their experience and guides them through the process, leading to fewer repeat calls and lower call volumes.
 - HATS uses Cordic transport software; drivers use personal digital assistants (PDAs) to record pick-ups and “no pick-ups”. HATS is working on improved reporting so that attendance and absence data can be shared more systematically with the council.
 - Vehicles are being fitted with AI-enabled CCTV which:
 - Detects unsafe driver behaviour (e.g. using the PDA or phone while driving, speeding, aggressive driving) and sends alerts.
 - Enables faster, evidence-based investigations of incidents and complaints.
 - Automatically blurs children’s faces, so staff reviewing footage cannot identify individual children.
 - HATS acknowledged the system is expensive but concluded it “pays dividends” in safeguarding, investigations and staff management.
- Safeguarding, training and incident management
 - All staff working on home to school routes undergo DBS checks.

- Passenger assistants receive PATS (Passenger Assistant Training) plus safeguarding and first aid training. Drivers receive MiDAS (Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme) training, covering:
 - Vehicle safety checks
 - Safe driving
 - Securing wheelchairs and specialist equipment
 - Interactions with children and young people with SEND.
- For children with complex medical needs, staff receive additional training, for example in administering medications, using EpiPens, and other specific requirements.
- HATS aims to provide consistent drivers and PAs on each route, with staff annual leave usually taken outside term-time to minimise disruption.
- Dan described how staff manage challenging incidents on vehicles, such as:
 - Children removing clothing
 - Fighting between pupils
 - Spitting or other difficult behaviours.
- In such cases:
 - The driver must pull over safely if a child is unrestrained.
 - The PA attempts to de-escalate and distract the child, while preserving safety and dignity.
 - The driver contacts the HATS office, which liaises with the council; where necessary, parents may be asked to attend.
 - Physical intervention is avoided where possible and is left to staff judgement in situations of immediate risk.
- Route planning, journey length and absences
 - Southwark Council plans routes, which are then risk-assessed by HATS, especially where routes are new or complex.
 - The standard approach is for children to travel to and from school on the same route with the same crew, although there are anomalies (e.g. after-school clubs, respite placements).

- Standard journey-time limits are:
 - 45 minutes for younger children
 - 75 minutes for older pupils.
- If there is no answer at the door, this can significantly disrupt routes. HATS will:
 - Attempt to confirm the child's status (e.g. illness)
 - Notify the council
 - Record a "no pick-up" in the system via Cordic.
- Pricing arrangements vary between local authorities (e.g. route-based vs per-child charging). Dan was not able to give precise details for Southwark's model but noted that in some cases a child's absence may result in a reduced cost where a per-child element applies.
- Staffing, pay and ratios
 - For Southwark's home to school contract:
 - PSV-licensed drivers are paid £15.40 per hour.
 - Non-PSV drivers and passenger assistants are paid at London Living Wage.
 - As a default, there is one PA to a maximum of nine pupils on a vehicle.
 - Routes are risk-assessed: some may have a second PA, and in rare cases a single child with highly complex needs may be supported by two PAs.
- Family members on vehicles
 - HATS does not routinely allow family members to accompany children on vehicles because of:
 - Capacity constraints
 - DBS and safeguarding considerations
 - The need to be consistent between families.
 - However, individual cases can be considered in collaboration with the council.

- Travel assistance consultation and independent travel
 - Members noted that the council had launched a consultation on travel assistance for young people on the day of the meeting, including proposals to:
 - Promote public transport and independent travel where appropriate
 - Consider pick-up points instead of door-to-door collection.
 - Dan observed that:
 - Many children are eager to develop independence; parental anxiety is often the main barrier.
 - Travel training programmes need to communicate closely with parents and show positive outcomes for children.
 - Pick-up point models, piloted elsewhere, have been operationally feasible but unpopular with parents, and require clear leadership and communication.
- Cost, quality and contract management
 - The commission noted concerns about the balance between cost and quality in a privately operated service that was previously run in-house.
 - Dan reported that HATS has regular monthly contract meetings with the council and that value-for-money and quality are reviewed at least annually.

Commission discussion and conclusions

- Questioned HATS on staff vetting, training, pay and support given the complex behaviours they handle.
- Sought clarification on route design, journey length limits, attendance recording and charging models.
- Explored HATS' experience of independent travel training and parental concerns, noting the relevance for the council's travel assistance consultation.
- Raised broader concerns about how the council assures quality and safeguarding in a privately delivered service.

The commission noted:

- The operational improvements introduced by HATS and the council, including the three-day complaints KPI, the parent app and AI-enabled vehicle monitoring.
- The sensitivities for parents of SEND children and the importance of clear, timely communication and robust safeguarding.
- Recommendations to Cabinet are likely to include:
 - Ensuring that all staff working on Southwark's home-to-school contract are paid at least London Living Wage, recognising the complexity and responsibility of the work.
 - Exploring whether joint procurement or purchasing frameworks with other boroughs could improve value for money without compromising quality.
 - Ensuring that the travel assistance consultation and subsequent policy incorporate learning from HATS' experience, including:
 - The central importance of parental reassurance and communication in independent travel training
 - Careful piloting and evaluation of pick-up point models for SEND pupils.

The commission thanked Dan Hardy for his attendance and contribution.

6. UPDATE ON CHARLOTTE SHARMAN AND ST. MARY MAGDALENE PUPILS POST CLOSURES OF THE SCHOOLS.

The commission received a report and verbal update from Neil Gordon- Orr, Assistant Director for Education Access (Children and Adult Services), on the closure of Charlotte Sharman Foundation Primary School and St Mary Magdalene Church of England Primary School in August 2025, in the context of falling primary school rolls across Southwark and London.

Context and process

- Both schools closed after a lengthy, statutory process involving consultation and decision stages over approximately one year.
- Southwark, commonly in the many London boroughs, has experienced a significant decline in births and primary pupil numbers over the last decade, with London Councils recently publishing analysis showing similar pressures elsewhere.
- Across Southwark, eight primary schools have closed in the past five years,

some through closure and some via amalgamation with other schools.

Impact on pupils and parental choice

- The council recognises that school closure is disruptive for parents and pupils, and that as soon as closure becomes a realistic possibility some families seek to move their children early for certainty.
- To support families at Charlotte Sharman and St Mary Magdalene:
 - A dedicated admissions officer was assigned to each school to advise parents and help secure new places.
 - Open days were organised at neighbouring schools, many of which had vacancies and were keen to take additional pupils.
 - A preference exercise was run, similar to the normal admissions process. Of the 34 families who took part:
 - 26 secured their first-preference school
 - 5 secured their second-preference school
 - Only a small number did not obtain one of their top preferences and were supported to consider other options.
- The council provided £50 school uniform vouchers to each child moving school as a contribution towards uniform costs.

Special educational needs and vulnerable pupils

- Particular attention was paid to pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) or additional vulnerabilities:
 - EHCPs were reviewed to ensure new placements could meet their needs.
 - Sending and receiving schools worked together on transition planning, including sharing strategies and information and ensuring files transferred correctly.

Staffing

- Members asked about the impact on staff, including teachers, teaching assistants, administrative staff, catering and crossing staff.
- Officers noted that while teachers might find it relatively straightforward to secure alternative employment due to national shortages, detailed data on individual staff outcomes were not available at the meeting and would need to be checked separately.

The commission explored the future use and ownership of the former school sites:

- Charlotte Sharman Foundation Primary School
 - As a foundation school, the land and buildings belong to the school's foundation (governing body).
 - On closure, the governing body is disbanded and the future of the site is determined by the Secretary of State for Education. In many cases, assets revert to the local authority, but this is subject to a formal decision.
 - A decision on the Charlotte Sharman site is still awaited.
- St Mary Magdalene Church of England Primary School
 - The land and buildings are owned by a church-related trust linked to the parish in Bermondsey, rather than directly by the Diocesan Board

of Education.

- The church is responsible for determining the future use of the site, but the council is in active discussion with church partners about possible educational or SEND-related uses.
- Officers emphasised that ownership arrangements are often complex, with mixed local authority and foundation/diocesan ownership, and that one learning from recent closures is the need to map site ownership and legal constraints early in any process.

Wider demographic trends and future risk

- Officers advised that although the sharp decline in births appears to be levelling off, there is no indication of a return to previous higher levels. Smaller cohorts are moving through primary and will increasingly affect secondary intakes.
- The commission noted that South Bank University Academy is consulting on a proposal to cease Year 7 admissions over time and operate only as a sixth-form, due to falling numbers. As an academy, this decision lies with the Department for Education.
- There are no current proposals for further primary closures in Southwark, but the underlying demographic challenge remains.

Housing and temporary accommodation

- Members raised concerns that families in temporary accommodation placed outside the borough or moved long distances may be contributing to falling rolls and attendance pressures at some schools.
- Officers acknowledged that housing issues impact individual families and schools but suggested the primary driver of falling rolls is the sustained reduction in births and wider trends in family size.

Keeping Education Strong and lessons learned

- Officers explained that the Keeping Education Strong strategy has provided a borough-wide framework to manage falling rolls through:
 - Reductions in Published Admission Numbers (PANs)
 - Amalgamations
 - Closures as a last resort.
- The commission heard that this has helped to protect the viability of remaining schools by reducing overcapacity and competition for pupils.
- Lessons identified from recent closures included:
 - The importance of assigning a dedicated admissions caseworker early.
 - Starting planning early for complex SEND cases, even before final closure decisions, while managing the risk of destabilising schools.
 - Early work to clarify land and asset ownership.

The commission noted the update and did not propose additional formal recommendations at this stage but agreed that these lessons should continue to inform any future decisions on school organisation.

7. WORK PROGRAMME 2025-26

The Chair highlighted the following priorities for the final meeting:

- A Cabinet Member interview with Councillor John Batterson, Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency, Jobs and Business covering:
 - A holistic overview of strategies and projects within the portfolio.
 - Repairs in commercial units, including:
 - Timeliness of repairs
 - Impact on businesses
 - Compensation
 - Specific issues such as leaks from residential properties above commercial premises.
 - An update on high streets works, town centre action plans and related East Street Market and town centre programmes, building on previous pre-decision scrutiny.
- To develop and agree draft recommendations to Cabinet from this year's scrutiny work, with the aim of submitting these before the pre-election period.

Meeting ended at 8:35 pm

CHAIR:

DATED: