Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission held on Thursday 23 July 2026 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G01A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Rachael Penny (Chair)
Councillor Hellen Benavides (Vice- Chair)
Councillor Jasmine Ali
Councillor John Batteson
Councillor Callum Fowler
Councillor Tori Griffiths
Councillor Felicia Johnston
Alie Kallon (Co-opted member)
Mannah Kargbo (Co-opted member)

OFFICER SUPPORT: Amit Alva, Scrutiny Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Co-opted members Martin Brecknell and Claire Williams.

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.

Councillor Jasmine Ali declared that she used to be the lead member for Children, this with regards to the item on the outcome of the Ofsted inspection of local authority children's services, this was her previous role in the council.

There were no other interests or dispensations.

4. MINUTES

The commission noted the minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2026.

5. GENERAL UPDATE ON BERMONDSEY BLUE - BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT (BID)

The commission received an update from Ben Davies on the work of the Bermondsey Blue Business Improvement District and the challenges facing businesses in the area.

Business Improvement District update

The commission heard about work undertaken during the summer in partnership with the council, including a festival intended to provide activities for children and support families during the school holidays. The Business Improvement District had contributed £10,000 and the council approximately £9,500. It was intended that the festival would be repeated the following year.

An affordable co-working space was being developed in a railway arch. The proposed model would enable early-stage businesses to occupy affordable space for approximately two to three years before moving on as they developed. The intention was to create opportunities for entrepreneurs, particularly those working in sectors where initial costs could be prohibitive.

The commission heard that spending in the area had fallen by approximately 8% to 10%, while footfall had not reduced to the same extent. It was explained that the spending information was derived from indexed card-payment data rather than the individual takings of businesses. Increased business rates were identified as a particular pressure on small businesses.

Retail crime

The commission heard that retail crime was a significant concern, but that many businesses had stopped reporting incidents because they found the process burdensome or believed that reporting would not result in effective action.

The recorded figures were not considered to reflect the actual prevalence of retail theft. The Business Improvement District had therefore developed a simpler reporting mechanism and hoped to gather more accurate evidence to present to the police and the borough commander.

The Business Improvement District had also offered the proposed co-working

space to the local police team when officers required a base in the Bermondsey area.

Following discussions with the safer neighbourhood team, work was taking place to convert the police reporting form into a shorter digital process using staged questions, check boxes and drop-down options. The intention was to make reporting less burdensome for local businesses.

Schools and employment pathways

The Business Improvement District was working with local schools and funding opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in outdoor activities.

The commission heard that Big Local Works had been commissioned to arrange visits by pupils to businesses in the area. The visits would provide young people with an understanding of different workplaces and organisations. It was recognised that businesses would require support to work effectively with schools and that schools were well placed to advise on the needs and suitability of individual pupils.

Local schools had also been invited to participate in the Business Improvement District board. Greater involvement by schools could help children and young people influence local events and contribute to shaping the area.

Examples were given of involving pupils and community groups in the design and delivery of activities, including lantern-making and puppet events. This approach encouraged children, families and other residents to participate in the resulting public events.

Members suggested that the council could help broker relationships between schools and businesses. Possible approaches included identifying talent champions within schools and supporting direct contact between teachers, headteachers and local employers. The possibility of businesses making a contribution to participating schools when a placement resulted in sustained employment was also discussed.

High street and local development

The commission discussed the difference between the areas to the north and south of the railway line. New routes through railway arches and nearby developments had the potential to increase movement towards the Blue and bring additional spending into the area.

The redevelopment of part of the former Biscuit Factory had reduced the number

of people working and spending locally during the construction period. It was hoped that improved routes and future development would help address this.

Brotherhood Games was cited as a positive example of support for a local entrepreneur. An initial rent-free period had reportedly helped the business become established and it now employed nearly 25 people.
The commission heard that the number of betting shops had declined, although concerns remained about their concentration in a relatively deprived neighbourhood.

Members also discussed fast-food outlets near schools and whether they should be considered alongside betting shops when assessing the composition of the high street. The need to encourage healthier choices was recognised, although this had to be balanced against the difficult trading environment faced by the high street.

Vacant premises and commercial lettings

Concerns were raised about commercial premises which did not open to the public or kept solid shutters closed. It was suggested that blank shutters reduced natural surveillance and adversely affected the appearance and atmosphere of the high street. The Business Improvement District representative explained that similar concerns had been raised with the council over several years.

Members discussed the role of the council's property portfolio in supporting the local economy, increasing footfall and attracting businesses which could benefit the wider area.

The commission heard that businesses and residents did not have sufficient visibility of the commercial lettings process. Prospective occupiers could experience difficulty obtaining information about vacant premises and, on occasion, did not receive a response after expressing an interest.
Greater transparency was requested concerning:

- the role and remuneration of the council's letting agents;
- the criteria used to select tenants;
- the handling of expressions of interest and offers;
- the balance between rental income and wider social or economic value;
- the availability and status of empty units; and
- the use of auction-based lettings where premises remained vacant.

The commission heard that established local business owners could provide valuable insight into the types of businesses likely to succeed in the area. Some businesses might also require support with shopfronts and marketing.

Business Improvement District capacity and partnership working

The Business Improvement District representative explained that the organisation's annual budget was approximately £100,000 to £120,000, excluding external funding. This was substantially smaller than the budgets of some other Business Improvement Districts, limiting the number of projects that could be delivered. The organisation therefore needed to focus on fewer priorities and deliver them effectively.

The commission heard that the Bermondsey Blue Business Improvement District worked closely with established Business Improvement Districts elsewhere in Southwark. New or emerging districts could benefit from:

- initial financial assistance;
- advice about the Business Improvement District model;
- help modelling potential levy income; and
- practical support during the establishment process.

The Business Improvement District considered that it had been consulted effectively on the Bermondsey town centre plan. Further work was, however, required to engage the wider business community, including businesses based in the Biscuit Factory.

Summary

The Chair identified the principal matters arising from the evidence as:

- improving transparency in commercial lettings;
- improving communication with businesses seeking premises;
- making better use of local business knowledge;
- supporting new Business Improvement Districts;
- strengthening links between schools and businesses; and
- improving information available to residents and businesses about vacant commercial properties.

6. OUTCOME OF OFSTED INSPECTION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY CHILDREN'S SERVICES (ILACS)

The commission received a presentation from Helen Woolgar, Deputy Director of Children's Social Care, and Oyeyinka Olaniran, Head of Quality Assurance and Workforce Development for Children's Services.

Ofsted had undertaken a week-long inspection in March 2026 and published its report in May 2026. Children's services had retained a judgement of "good" across the inspected areas.

Strengths

The commission heard that the inspection identified the following strengths:

- strong political and corporate leadership;
- stable leadership within children's services;
- a skilled, stable and motivated workforce;
- strong support for children in care and care leavers;
- effective family early-help services;
- parent advocates and supporting families through child-protection processes;
- family group conferencing and family-based decision-making;
- the contribution of Speaker Box;
- strong corporate parenting arrangements; and
- innovation and a clear understanding of the service's strengths and development needs.

The commission was informed that care leavers were supported up to the age of 25. Parent advocates with direct experience of children's social care supported parents involved in areas of child-protection. Speaker Box and care-experienced young people contributed to the design and development of services.

Areas for improvement

The three principal areas identified for improvement were:

- oversight of children subject to police-protection powers;
- responses to children in care who went missing; and
- the quality and consistency of recorded management oversight and supervision.

Further areas for development included embedding life-story work, improving consideration of early-permanence arrangements and refreshing the published care-leaver offer.

Police protection

Practice guidance had been amended to require review strategy meetings and closer monitoring of child safety arrangements.

Six-weekly joint meetings between the local authority and the police had been introduced to review police-protection cases. The performance dashboard had also been updated to include specific reporting on police protection.

Missing Children in Care

A cross-service missing improvement steering group and a weekly missing children panel had been established. Training for key workers and carers was planned, alongside an evaluation of return-home interviews and the resources available to undertake them. Officers identified children going missing as the area currently presenting the greatest challenge.

The commission heard that some young people continued to return to locations or relationships where they were at risk of exploitation. The service had considered national research, worked with specialist organisations and provided mentors to some children who had experienced exploitation. Speaker Box had also highlighted the importance of distinguishing between children who were genuinely missing and older teenagers whose whereabouts were known but were late returning home or staying with friends.

Care-experienced young inspectors had been trained to visit children's homes and supported accommodation. Consideration was also being given to training care leavers to undertake return-home interviews. The weekly panel, training, return-home interviews and improved performance information were expected to support a more consistent response. Progress would be reviewed in September 2026 and March 2027.

Management oversight and quality assurance

Monthly reporting arrangements were being strengthened to improve oversight of supervision and practice quality. The audit framework had been redesigned and the number of audit cycles increased from two to four each year. The service would continue to hold practice-learning weeks focused on priority themes affecting children and families.

Members asked how the impact of the improvement programme on staff would be monitored. Officers explained that implementation would be phased and that staff feedback had already informed proposed changes to the audit tool.
Feedback would continue to be gathered through heads of service, service

managers, team managers and audit and learning officers based within service areas.

Life-story work

The council had initially established a dedicated life-story worker post. Although this produced effective work with individual children, it had not provided sufficient coverage across the service.

The approach had therefore been expanded to include:

- a revised life-story work policy;
- materials and training for the wider workforce;
- a network of life-story champions;
- weekly support sessions;
- involvement of social workers and personal advisers;
- a workflow to monitor completion; and
- consideration of life-story work during case audits and performance meetings.

Early help and the service front door

Members asked about delays experienced by a small cohort of families in accessing early-help services.

The commission heard that the council was combining two previous routes into services to establish one front door. Housing officers were expected to form part of the new arrangements, alongside a multidisciplinary rapid-response team which would provide quicker support to families. The changes were being implemented and their impact could not yet be reported. It was noted that the new front-door arrangements did not appear in the current improvement plan because consultation on the structural changes had only recently concluded. Officers agreed to consider how the changes could be incorporated into the improvement plan and linked more explicitly to the inspection findings.

Reform, workforce and financial pressures

Members asked how the council would protect the strengths identified by Ofsted during a period of financial pressure and service reform.

The commission heard that frontline practitioners, parents and young people had

participated in the design of the reforms. Pilot work had tested social workers working alongside practitioners with different professional qualifications. The model was intended to reduce the number of changes of worker experienced by families. Officers also reported progress towards an almost fully permanent social-work workforce.

Children and young people's participation

The commission heard that children and young people contributed to:

- recruitment interviews;
- Speaker Box;
- corporate parenting;
- service design;
- direct-work tools;
- feedback gathered through audits; and
- the design and development of the council's children's home.

The council's children's home had been inspected in December 2025 and was judged outstanding.

Older children entering care

Members enquired about the proportion of older children entering care and the preventative work available.

The commission heard about Adolescent Sure Start, the adolescent hub, the Turnaround project and the Keeping Families Together team. Family group conferences, parenting programmes, a fathers' programme and clinical support were also available.

Officers explained that adolescence could bring additional challenges, including exploitation, extra-familial harm, a breakdown in family relationships and difficulties associated with additional needs. Although the overall number of children in care had declined, adolescents continued to represent a significant proportion of children entering care. Similar patterns had been identified by other London boroughs.

The commission also heard about lifelong-links work intended to preserve children's connections with family members, siblings and other important people where they could no longer live at home.

Future Ofsted framework

The commission discussed anticipated changes to the Ofsted framework.
Officers explained that there would no longer be an overarching effectiveness judgement, although individual areas would continue to be assessed using different terminology. The experience and progress of care leavers would remain central.

The commission also heard that an authority with children placed in unregulated provision would be restricted in the judgement it could achieve. At the time of the meeting, Southwark had no children in unregulated provision.

Corporate Parenting Committee

Members expressed concern about the cancellation of a recent Corporate Parenting Committee meeting and the length of time before the next scheduled meeting.

Officers understood that the meeting had been postponed, with a meeting expected in October and an additional meeting anticipated in December. The Chair requested that the position be checked, as members understood that a replacement meeting might take place before October.

Actions

- Officers to consider incorporating the redesigned early-help front door and rapid-response arrangements into the children's services improvement plan.
- The arrangements for a replacement Corporate Parenting Committee meeting to be checked.
- The commission to consider progress against the children's services improvement plan following the September 2026 review and again in relation to the March 2027 review.

The commission thanked the officers for their presentation and noted the clear opportunities for scrutiny to monitor progress during the year.

7. WORK PROGRAMME DISCUSSION 2026-27

The commission discussed potential work plan items for its 2026-27 work programme.

Local Economy

Suggested topics included:

- East Street Market;
- the Youth Guarantee;
- employment support for young people not in education, employment or training (NEET);
- support for young people with special educational needs and disabilities;
- apprenticeships, internships and work experience; Youth Parliament
- Southwark Works;
- support for people experiencing complex barriers to employment;
- thriving high streets and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs')
- support for small businesses;
- vacant commercial properties;
- the council's commercial property portfolio;
- railway arches;
- Business Improvement Districts;
- London Living Hours;
- Community Infrastructure Levy;
- the Elephant and Castle town centre; and
- interviews with relevant cabinet members.

Members considered that work on youth employment should be broader than work experience and should include apprenticeships, internships and other routes into employment.

Further consideration of commercial property was supported, including vacant premises, transparency in lettings, auction-based lettings and the contribution of council-owned premises to thriving high streets. It was noted that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would need to consider the allocation of this subject.

The Elephant and Castle town centre was suggested as a possible topic, with a focus on supporting independent businesses, involving the existing community and monitoring the effects of development.

Members also suggested inviting the Youth Parliament to contribute young people's views to the commission's work.

The commission emphasised that its programme should focus on matters where recommendations could influence council policy or practice. Policies and programmes set out by central government might not represent the most effective use of the commission's time.

Education and Children's services

Suggested topics included:

- SEND reform;
- falling school rolls and pupil-place planning;
- the impact of possible secondary-school closures;
- the future use of former school buildings;
- transitions from adolescent to adult mental-health services;
- children's mental health;
- the annual Southwark Safeguarding Children Partnership (SSCP) report;
- children in care and care leavers;
- corporate parenting; and
- follow-up of the Ofsted improvement plan.

Members supported scrutiny of SEND reform and suggested that evidence gathering could take place in a school or a special school. This could form part of a wider approach involving site visits and scrutiny activity outside the usual council meeting venue.

The commission discussed falling school rolls and the importance of monitoring pupil-place planning following school closures. Members also wished to consider how former school buildings could be retained for educational or community use.

A focused review of children in care and care leavers was proposed. Members noted that the September 2026 and March 2027 review points would provide opportunities to follow up the children's services improvement plan.

Scrutiny Review Process and Recommendations

Members asked whether recommendations could be made during the municipal

year rather than waiting for a final annual report.

The commission was advised that recommendations should be based on sufficiently gathered evidence from all stakeholders. Further work on Business Improvement Districts, for example, could include evidence from council officers, other Business Improvement Districts and individual business owners. A scrutiny review report could be produced once sufficient evidence had been gathered and did not have to be deferred until the end of the year. Members emphasised the need to determine the scope, intended output and timetable for each review at an early stage.

Actions

- The Scrutiny Officer to develop the work programme proposals in consultation with the Chair, commission members and relevant council officers.
- Consideration to be given to inviting the relevant cabinet members for interview.
- Local-economy evidence gathering to include council officers, Business Improvement District representatives and local business owners where appropriate.
- The Youth Parliament to be considered as a contributor to relevant reviews.
- Outstanding cabinet responses to recommendations from the previous municipal year to be identified and brought back where appropriate.
- The commission to determine the proposed number, scope and timetable of its review reports at an early stage.

Meeting ended at 9.20 pm

CHAIR:

DATED: