

## Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission held on Tuesday 16 November 2021 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

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**PRESENT:** Councillor Peter Babudu (Chair)  
Councillor William Hougbo  
Councillor Radha Burgess  
Councillor Karl Eastham  
Councillor Michael Situ  
Martin Brecknell  
Lynette Murphy-O'Dwyer  
Marcin Jagodzinski  
Mannah Kargbo

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

### 1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Nick Johnson and Councillor Eleanor Kerlake.

Apologies for lateness was received by Councillor Karl Eastham.

### 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 disclosure of interests and dispensations.

### **4. MINUTES**

In the Minutes of the previous meeting held on 29 September 2021 it was noted by officers that the commission's request to circulate the Pupil Place Planning report going to Cabinet on 19 October 2021 authored by Nina Dohel, Director of Education, was omitted in error and needs to be amended.

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 17 March 2021 were approved as a correct record.

### **5. SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITY (SEND) - OVERVIEW**

The commission first heard from Nicky, Parent and Chair of Southwark Independent Voice (SIV), a parent-led volunteer organisation working to share information and resources to improve the life of individuals with SEND living in Southwark. The commission learnt about Nicky's difficult experiences with her son who suffers from Autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), in addition to self-harming tendencies, severe anxiety, obesity and sleep issues. The commission also heard that Nicky's son is intelligent and that he is on his tenth educational setting, average educational placements last 12 months and mostly part-time. Nicky also informed the commission that initially through Southwark Council and under her supervision her son would attend tuition in the library, however for the past two and half years her son has been attending a school which involves a lot of travelling which cause him to have severe anxiety and be travel sick, this current educational placement ends in July 2022.

The commission learnt from Nicky about the struggles of being a single parent of a child with SEND with regards to changing educational settings and travelling to schools with her child that are further away, it was at the current Spa specialist school where she got introduced to Simon Eccles, Executive Head Teacher, Spa Education Trust who was also present at the commission meeting.

Nicky also explained to the commission, how the initially setup parent care forum for SEND failed and a new forum was started by herself to help parents navigate through the process with guidance from experienced parents such as herself. Nicky explained further that since 2015 every borough has a parent care forum for SEND which has been linked into its Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP), the government has mandated that each parent care forum receives £17,500 a year through the Department of Education also ensuring its parent-led, parent voices are heard and it is supported by professionals. The commission also learnt that the staffing costs amount for half of the £17500, this does not leave a lot of money for other aspects of running a forum and providing support. Nicky explained to the

commission that she led an initiative to convince parents who have professional experience from different fields to run coffee mornings, webinars and much needed training for parents who are relatively new and inexperienced with processes of SEND.

The commission heard from Nicky that specialist schools such as Spa have been doing an amazing job at providing specialist education however mainstream provision has a lot of issues. Southwark Independent Voice has won the community group of the year award within the borough and is now reaching to help other parent led groups by sharing their experiences and practices. When a child is identified at an early age with special needs, specialist provisions in Southwark work quite well to support the child, some mainstream schools do have provisions but with rise in more independent schools there is a lack of interaction and training, more work needs to be done for SEND provisions in such schools.

The commission also learnt that autistic children often don't get identified as special needs because they can speak and are nurtured by primary schools and because they are not more than two years behind, it's only realised when the behavioural changes occur such as meltdown, tendencies to self-harm and suicides especially in girls.

Nicky explained to the commission that children in special needs schools like her son get an extra year for six-form which means three years instead of the two years as in regular schools which would bring her child to the age of 19 and he would now have to move on to other educational settings although he likes this educational setting and wants to stay on. The commission also learnt from Nicky that in the early years, issues were around lack of social workers and the support you get would largely depend on the quality of social work support with regards to listening and actions taken. However, nowadays the support depends on the SEN co-ordinator and the teachers who might not have the professional expertise to support children with SEND, parents are quite apprehensive about moving their children onto mainstream provisions due to change in teachers who are not trained in supporting children with SEND.

The commission also heard about the work Southwark Council has been doing with SIV on developing the new four stage work stream SEND strategy with input from parents, this strategy also includes work done on an autism review. The main stream provisions in the early years such as nursery are quite good and provide adequate support, however in the primary and secondary years the support only comes in when the child is being difficult and disruptive which by then is too late, there is also some work being done to look at the 16-25 years pathway which needs improvement.

The commission also learnt that a child identified with learning difficulties gets really good education and support from primary and secondary special needs schools, however children who are academically able but autistic rely on mainstream provisions as they don't fit in with special needs, such children are often in big numbers in mainstream schools and don't get enough effective support.

Children in these situations are having to go out of the borough for educational placements with the help of an EHC plan, and on returning to the borough the children are alien to their surroundings with regards to independent living, community living, using public transports and shops.

Nicky then answered the commission's questions on the following areas:

- Communication, training needs and spreading awareness
- Non-functional areas of the SEND system
- EHCP acceptance levels

The commission learnt that parents are often incorrectly perceived to be difficult and/or aggressive during meetings which really stems from parents being concerned and scared for their child's future and their own livelihood, a lot of parents of children with SEND have given up their careers, living on benefits to care for their child. Training for parents is crucial on how to communicate manage meetings with Social workers, Schools and NHS services such as Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), training for staff in mainstream schools is also key in identifying and supporting children with special needs, especially in areas like dyslexia which is considered to be a learning difficulty.

Some of the issues with the SEND system that are broken or non-functional occurs when a child with special needs does not fit into a particular category of schools, for example mainstream or specialist schools for autistic children who are academically performing. Children with special needs are often put on six-month waiting list for assessments by CAMHS whilst they are at imminent risk of self-harm and suicidal tendencies. Mainstream schools, often due to lack of training and/or awareness don't admit that a particular child has special needs and are managed without any special needs support. The commission also learnt one of the major issues with the system is the communication between different bodies in SEND such as NHS, CAMHS, Social works team & EHCP and also Primary and Secondary Schools and the transitions between them. Communication between parents and schools is quite important but often lacking and schools don't take action because a certain incident doesn't occur at school such as self-harm, schools still rely on assessments from CAMHS.

The commission also learnt from Nicky about the benefits of holistic approaches like massage therapy to help children with difficulty in concentration and behavioural issues, sleep issues and low self-esteem which has led to them performing better academically.

On EHCP acceptance rates the commission learnt that it mainly depends on whether the child in mainstream schools is doing well academically which then means that the child would not usually qualify for an EHCP in spite of having special needs which in turn means that parents have to pay between £9000 to £15000 to appeal the case at a tribunal causing financial difficulties for parents. Parents who are successful in getting an EHCP often find that the plan is not being monitored and that their child is not receiving the support in schools that they should according to the EHCP.

The commission also learnt from Nicky that in Southwark SEND system the Southwark Information Advice and Support Team (SIAS) are excellent in providing information, support and advice for parents from start of the journey to the very age of 25 but the awareness that this service exists is lacking among parents, the commission also heard from Nicky that despite her efforts to spread SEND and SIAS leaflets to 66 schools, over 50% of them had not passed it on to parents.

The commission also discussed that some parents are unwilling to accept that their children are in need of specialist support at the primary schools stage and that there is an urgent need to convince parents to get early help and put them on the waiting lists to get appropriate support, there also exists some cultural barriers amongst parents in ethnic minority groups who are in denial and find it difficult to accept that their children have special needs leading to apprehension in approaching parent-led, Council and NHS, SEND groups and services.

The commission next heard from Simon Eccles, Executive Head teacher, Spa Education Trust who gave an introduction to Spa Schools and its specialist services. The commission learned that over the past 15 or more years, Simon as Head teacher has seen the schools expand with the construction of a new building increasing capacity from 80 to 90 pupils with many new features and now they are at 100 pupils' capacity, however they are really oversubscribed and currently schooling 110 pupils. Spa schools have a strong ethos and good practice, constantly reinforcing kindness, consistency and clearly defined systems for pupils with autism, this has helped the schools go from a satisfactory school at grade three to being classed as an outstanding school for children with special needs.

Simon also explained to the commission that Southwark is one of the best places in the country in terms of opportunities such as the Globe Theatre and Tate modern where children can perform on stage, play house and dance companies, sports facilities such as Oval cricket ground and Millwall football club. In addition Simon also explained the focus on life skills as a part of their curriculum, teachers at Spa schools have worked over the years with speech language therapists to develop a subject called social communication. In this subject children get to practice and rehearse responses in all sorts of social situation like coping with rejections, confrontation on a bus, misunderstandings in conversations etc. The commission also heard on the practical elements of the curriculum which involved growing vegetables, farming chickens for eggs to be used in cooking at School House Café run by five stage 5 children which is open to the public, children can opt to go for work experience at the café for an hour or more where they can make hot drinks and interact with the local community in Bermondsey.

Simon also informed the commission that five years ago they were approached by Southwark Council to open a new school as Local Authorities are no longer allowed to open a school and it's down to individuals and multi-academy trusts. The council had located a building used by Southwark College on Southampton Row which was then utilised to open Spa Camberwell for children with Autism ages five to sixteen, this has now been going for over a year. Spa Camberwell has grown from 42 to 68 children and will eventually have 120 children.

The commission also learned that there is an increasing need for schools for children with special needs from across 19 Local Authorities in London which have children admitted to Spa Schools. The demand for special schools within the London councils' respective boroughs is high due to the £20 million deficit in the high needs education budget and sending pupils outside the borough to an independent school could cost as much as four times compared to local or academy schools which have better quality education.

Simon also informed the commission that with help of Southwark Council they have opened a special needs college for young adults between the ages of 19 to 25 focused on employability skills and getting young people into work, this was the result of feedback from pupil reunions and follow ups of children with Autism who would drop out of college courses and remain homes for the rest of their lives. Screen addiction is especially an issue with young male adults and children with Autism, getting young adults back into work part-time or full time, supported or unsupported gives them structure and meaning to their day which is beneficial for them and society. For the past two years Park College for young adults in Kennington is run as a separate organisation but staffed and resourced by old staff from the Spa Education Trust until it large enough to get its own finance, human resources and IT systems in place. The Park College trustees since inception have been Simon Eccles and Head of Spa Camberwell, Steph Lee. The principal of the college is staff member of Spa and supported by members from Southwark Council Nina Dohel, Director of Education and Ian Morris who was Senior Adviser for Special Education Needs until summer 2021. The Park College has got 10 pupils in its first year and 10 in its second year with estimated to increase to 40 pupils in a couple of years.

The commission also heard that there are children with special needs who fall through the gaps who are usually the brighter children with special needs who struggle to cope with mainstream secondary school who are a lot larger in size and there are very little specialist provisions for children with SEND, many schools commit themselves to resources bases and then decide to postpone it for the next few years. Parents of children who fall under these moderate to severe learning difficulty category find it quite challenging because specialist schools provide below GCSE level education and the children eventually join independent schools with smaller classes, more of such independent schools in the borough could help with this issue.

Simon also explained to the commission that one of the other challenges are in recruitment of secondary special needs teachers as the UK teacher training system is designed either for primary or secondary schools and the best teachers for a special school are primary trained which make its complicated for primary mainstream teachers to take the leap to being a secondary special needs teacher. The commission also heard that Spa schools have a sponsorship license and normally would get teachers and teaching assistants from Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa staying and teaching for 2-5 years, this flow of teachers from abroad has now ceased due to Brexit and then the COVID pandemic.

The commission also heard that growing our own pool of primary school teachers can be achieved once Spa Camberwell gets an outstanding grade from Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and that it has been a long term recruitment goal, however unlike mainstream schools there are financial issues with the budget for special schools which not been reviewed for 10 years even though the complexities of children's needs have changed, this is further exacerbated by the 2% rise in teachers' pension contributions last year. There are 23 children in the Spa school with one to one needs every minute of the day due to safeguarding and security reasons this in addition to the rest of the children who require one to one access to their curriculums thus requiring a large number of staff. The Spa Trust have been extremely careful with finances as they are at risk of being in budget deficits in the last two years and also that they have resorted to centralisation of finance, HR, premises management etc. and they hope to be better financially with more pupils at Spa Camberwell due to economies of scale. The specialist schools nationally and across London boroughs are always running at full capacity and are in high demand which has led to opening of additional classes. Spa schools also communicate regularly and have healthy relationships with partners such as health and social care workers and council staff with regards to EHCPs' and other services, ensuring parents get the necessary support especially in dire situations of accommodation or safely looking after their children.

Simon then answered the commission's question on the following points

- Selection criteria for student admission and funding
- Work experience for young adults
- Challenges faced during pandemic by parents of children with SEND

Selection criteria begins with the diagnosis of Autism and assessment of the child's learning difficulties which has to be between severe to moderate. Parents are then asked to indicate their preferences and then at meetings facilitated by the council every year in November the needs of the child are matched with the specialist provisions that the school can provide, subject to availability of spaces the child is then admitted to the school, children from outside the borough are no more considered. Depending on parent preference and under the EHCP plan if an appropriate provider is identified and matched; private provider cost is between £70,000 to £80,000 and for academy schools such as Spa the Department of Education provides the first £10,000 base funding and Southwark Council tops up the funding with an additional £19,000.

The Park College at Kennington with the help of local partners provide short unpaid work experience to students based on their aptitude and preference in coffee houses, cycle maintenance workshops, laundry, and gardening there also plans to setup a bakery. In addition there have also been successful post college paid job placements in mailrooms and carwashes with local partners.

During the pandemic events have been organised for parents of children with SEND to meet speech language therapists where they can share their experiences and learning different forms of communication. Parents of children with challenging

behaviour and learning difficulties who struggle to have any social life have been invited to karaoke and disco nights. The system heads at school communicate with parents between 4pm and 6pm every school night to inform them of any incident with their child, building trust with parents, schools also have a family support worker who support families in different ways.

Simon also answered the commission's questions on the following points

- Support for academies compared to mainstream schools
- Transition of young people after completion of special needs school
- Rising demand for special school places within the borough and how it can be fulfilled.

The commission also learnt from Simon that support and communication with Southwark council does not change between mainstream schools and academies, Spa schools also received some financial support and advice in the form of options when they found themselves in financial difficulties. Furthermore, Simon has been helping Southwark council devise their Autism strategy and also chaired the group of the Heads of Special Schools over the past few years and a new Chair this year has taken over. Spa schools are not treated differently than mainstream schools, however there are some added pressures on schools which are a part of a bigger academy such as Newlands Academy.

Simon also informed the commission on the transition of young people leaving special schools to independent living; in most cases of parents who manage to get their children into independent living or supportive living or separate pay for accommodation are parents who are from the middle class with very good spoken and written skills or maybe even professionals. Families with lesser literary and articulacy skills struggle to get their children paid and the children end up living at home indefinitely well into their parents' old age. Social care funds are thinly stretched and there is a lot of reluctance to fund such elements of care.

On rising demand for special schools places in the borough, Simon explained to commission that existing schools need to be expanded such as Haimo Primary School and new schools such as one for Cherry Gardens need to be built. Simon explained to the commission that when a child's case reaches the tribunal, a lot of attention is paid to parental preference, due to the specific needs of the child which cannot be met by schools in the borough, the need for independent expensive schools outside the borough will be weaker if there is more support within the borough, there are only four resource bases in primary schools for children with Autism and the Autism outreach team is stretched for resources unable to provide better support. In the case of secondary schools there is a lack of willingness and understanding to have more children with special educational needs, another reason is higher survival rate at birth which will lead to schools for children with severe learning difficulties have a higher proportion of children with profound learning difficulties and schools such as Spa who have children with moderate learning difficulties having a higher proportion of children with severe learning difficulties.

On the transition between specialist and mainstream schools, the commission learnt that going from specialist school with small numbers in classes and a lot more care like Beormund to mainstream secondary schools does not work. Children with special needs do need continuous nurturing through primary and secondary school stages especially with regards to social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

The commission learnt from Simon that Southwark Council are doing well in providing outstanding specialist schools in a higher proportion than most boroughs. Southwark works hard to provide support and pathway to pupils and are also reviewing their Autism strategy to provide more resource bases or there should be satellites classes of children with special needs as an alternative. Simon also explained that his colleagues and other local authorities feel well supported by the SEND team at Southwark led by Nina Dohel, Director of Education and Yvonne Ely, Assistant Director, SEND provision.

On the nature of difficulties faced by specialist schools the commission learnt that special schools faces challenges in recruitment. Social care also struggles with recruitment due to high case workloads and being overworked which leads to a higher turnover of social care workers unable to cope with the pressures. Social care teams are under a lot of strain and most times the duty number calls are not answered unless you are very persistent. With regards to health, it's a long waiting list for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), often a year whilst young people are in crisis.

Simon also explained to the commission that Spa schools provide lots of paid training and outreach programs for visiting teachers, often overseas teachers especially from the Harris foundation who have 200 newly hires early career teachers who are then trained in special needs, however these training programs are mostly free for local schools and their teachers who are welcome to come spend a day and go back with some visual resources as well. Simon also explained to the commission that the current model for exclusion in mainstream schools of children with SEND puts up to 4 children in a class of 30, however some American schools have a better model of 6 children with special needs in a class of 18 children but this has financial implications.

The Chair informed the commission that officers were unable to attend this meeting to cover the next sub-item and report on SEND by Yvonne Ely, due to an ongoing pilot inspection by Ofsted. The Chair then opened the meeting to any questions or comments from commission members that can be emailed to officers for a response.

The commission raised the following questions:

- What insight and analysis from the 2015-2019 data can help us understand the reasons behind the large drop in achievements of children with SEND that are being admitted to specialist schools?
- What changes have there been in the method of assessments that could have possible impacted the achievements from 2015-2019? For e.g. heavily

text-based thus disadvantaging children that are non-native English speakers. (English as an additional language, EAL)

- What process or systemic improvements led to the rise in school referrals up from 26% to 40% compared to 2018 audit at the Sunshine House, community paediatric services? pg. 3 of report.
- How are EHC Plans managed with regards to refusal data, processing timelines and targets?
- What are the issues and reasons behind the lack of admissions in secondary schools of children with SEND in Southwark's Schools and Academies?
- What is Southwark Council doing to encourage provision of more SEND places in the borough?

**6. CABINET RESPONSE TO THE REPORT OF THE EDUCATION AND LOCAL ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMISSION: EDUCATION: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Cabinet response noted by the commission.

**7. PROPOSED WORK PROGRAMME 2021-22**

The Chair informed the commission of the need to have early draft recommendations on SEND and other scrutiny reviews ready by 8 March 2022 meeting

The Work Programme was noted by the commission.

Meeting ended at 9.52pm

**CHAIR:**

**DATED:**