

Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission held on Wednesday 27 January 2021 at 6.30 pm (Online virtual meeting).

PRESENT: Councillor Peter Babudu (Chair)
Councillor Anood Al-Samerai
Councillor Radha Burgess (Reserve)
Councillor Karl Eastham
Councillor Richard Leeming
Councillor Eliza Mann
Councillor Michael Situ
Martin Brecknell
Lynette Murphy-O'Dwyer

OFFICER SUPPORT: Everton Roberts, Head of Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Acting)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Eleanor Kerslake who is currently on maternity leave.

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

There were no late items.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

There were no disclosures of interests or dispensations.

4. MINUTES

It was reported that the minutes were still to be finalised and therefore held over to the next meeting for approval.

5. CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES AND EDUCATION THROUGH COVID

The commission heard from Eloise the founder and CEO of Anima Youth and young people involved with the organisation (Kendra, Ruth, Vanessa and Teresa). The young people attended different schools both in and outside Southwark, spoke about their experience of education through the pandemic.

The young people answered a series of questions put to them by the commission members. The responses highlighted a mixed experience of those taking part in the evidence session. The following issues came through in the responses.

How are you finding education through the pandemic, both learning from home and attending school?

- How the school responds to the pandemic has an impact on the students and how well the students respond to the change – example, schools emailing students to check how the students were doing.
- School not really checking on wellbeing, mostly focused on education and arrangements for next year.
- Too many expectations on students, and teachers are not teaching properly. Schools are not taking into consideration that some children are living their entire life from one room.
- Feels like they are teaching themselves and then have homework on top of that, along with other small issues such as poor wifi and so the work is building up.
- School undertaken Survey Monkey to see how students are finding lockdown and how they are finding the workload.
- Students finding it tough

Have you had much opportunity to express your concerns or how you are finding things, either through teacher or head of year?

- There has been opportunity to express how students are finding things, however sometimes this has been through email, which are sometimes overlooked by students – a phone call would possibly be better.
- Communication has been bad and the quality of lessons have gone down significantly. School has not been clear on whether they are going to do exams or what is expected of students. Teachers don't appear to be bothered, so why should students be.

Do you have any specific ideas about what the school and government could do to give better support for mental health for young people over the coming months?

- Organising virtual sessions, with student, teacher and counsellor, to provide safe space for students to express how they are feeling.
- Counselling service exists in school, but not open to using it. Could be barrier between her and the counsellor or that the counsellor will not be able to

understand her so more likely to not bother signing up.

- A lot of ambiguity over exams has caused a lot of anxiety, especially with teachers setting more assignments and setting mini tests, on top of this students don't know what their grades are going to be based on. This creates anxiety, and the pressure of feeling that you have to do well in every single thing, otherwise you are going to get bad grades. There needs to be more guidance and structure.
- School has encouraged students to talk about mental health, go on walks, have virtual classroom challenges with prizes. This has helped the students to interact.

How would you feel about repeating the year if things are back to normal by September?

- This would increase the anxiety of being left behind in life. Expectation is that you go to university at 18 – She will be class of 2022. Already missed the ecstatic feeling of finishing GCSEs, even results day was that good as they had to stand in a line. Already feels like she has missed so much.
- Already missed so much content, even though learning online, doesn't believe she will retain what she has learnt as she learns better at school. Having to go back to school and do everything again is a situation she personally does not want to be in. Would like a fresh start for next year and go to university at 18.

Do you feel like your school is doing very much at the moment to prepare you for those transition moments and do you have a sense that you are able to properly plan?

- School sends through information everyday about opportunities around engineering, maths, sciences and other subjects – feel school is doing quite well with opportunities. School still has assemblies and has guest talkers giving advice on universities and careers. Also have schools career advisor who is very interactive with students through email and teams meetings.
- Schools career advisor is not sending out emails notifying people on different options. Feels like the next step has been neglected within her school. Teachers are not talking about exams in general, employment or university.

Experience of school return between September and November, is there anything you think could be done better in terms of support and provision to students?

- Missed out on 6th form experience – there was no extracurricular activities. Lesson time was also cut down as well, along with restrictions.
- Had double and triple period lessons, breaks were shorter and was not able to move around the school due to bubbles. Students eventually became fed up with bubbles and started mixing in other bubbles. Only had mobile canteen, with limited selection of food.
- School was strict with bubbles, students were able to go outside of school for lunch and bring food inside school. Lessons were mainly double periods.

What are you most anxious about in terms of going back to school and what do you think schools should do consistently across London and the country to make people feel better?

- Anxious over whether going to get desired grades.
- Anxious about whether 6th form students will continue learning or have to go straight into having to make applications about personal statements, when haven't fully had 6th form experience. Would be helpful if there was a structured plan, setting out level of focus on academics and on the next steps and plan this out with students so that they can mentally prepare themselves.
- Schools should be open to the fact that the content being learned during lockdown isn't going to be learnt or retained as well. It would be helpful to rehearse and go over content again and for schools to provide revision resources such as flashcards.

Would mental health first aid training be of value for students?

- Yes, it's more comfortable to talk to a friend than going to a teacher.
- Would be useful to know where to direct a friend if they need help or don't want to talk to someone that knows them.

The Chair highlighted the written communication from Matt Jones, Southwark Association of Secondary Headteachers, which had been circulated with the agenda.

Following the conclusion of item 6, the commission discussed the issues raised through this evidence session and agreed to make some urgent enquiry with the cabinet member for children, young people and schools as detailed in the decision below.

RESOLVED:

We ask the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools to:

1. Urgently review counselling support currently available in schools and explore what additional help the council can provide, possibly in liaison with South London and Maudsley (SLAM)
2. Urgently confirm whether there are any Southwark children still without access to laptops and/or internet. If so to provide immediate assistance.
3. Confirm what action the council is taking to encourage families to come forward where they do not have devices and feel reluctance to accept support.

6. REVITALISATION OF HIGH STREETS AND TOWN CENTRES - SCRUTINY REVIEW (SESSION TWO)

The commission heard from Nick Plumb, Power to Change and Ben Stephenson, consultant

Nick informed the meeting that Power to Change was an independent charitable trust that supports and develops community businesses in England, established in 2015 through an endowment from the Big Lottery Fund, and since then has been supporting community

businesses in various different ways.

Power to Change believe that no one understands the community better than the people who live there, so it works with community businesses to revive local assets, protect services that people rely on, and address local needs.

Nick explained that community businesses have four key features:

- They are locally rooted in a particular geographical place and respond to local needs.
- They trade for the benefit of the local community.
- They are accountable to the local community.
- They have a broad community impact.

An example of a community business in Southwark was the Ivy House, in Nunhead, a community owned Pub. Elsewhere, there are community owned shops, communities that have taken ownership of heritage assets such as the Town Hall in Hebden Bridge which is in community ownership. Assets are at the core of the business model and is central to community businesses.

In the past couple of years, Power to Change have become increasingly interested in community ownership on the high street, it was something that was increasing in places across the country.

In respect of Power to Change's thinking on High Streets, Nick explained that the retail dominated model has been dying for quite a lot, in part driven by out of town retail and the rise of online shopping, accelerated by the pandemic. Retailers and businesses with a strong online offer have fared better, especially large multinationals like Amazon. At the same time, especially during the pandemic, there has been evidence to suggest that some of those secondary high streets and town centres that may have been a bit neglected, have started to see a bit more activity as people spend more time closer to home. Along with that, concepts like the 15 Minute City which was referenced in the Southwark economic renewal plan and GLA literature in recent months are gaining interest as people want to spend more time in their neighbourhood, which is an important development.

Nick felt there was a rising recognition among developers and property owners that they need to diversify if they are to continue to receive rent on the property that they own in high streets and town centres and that they need to increase footfall. One of the key ways of doing this would be through the introduction of diverse community businesses, such as art centres, community pubs and other places offering creative activities. The destination space that drives people to the high street is really important.

From the conversations Power to Change were having with local authorities, there was also an increasing recognition that councils have to play a slightly more activist role in that town centres if they are to halt the decline. Councils were not the only stakeholders, there are businesses and property owners, so how the council can play a role in convening discussions about local places was really key.

Future models of a civic High Street that is fit for the future were beginning to be seen in places like Plymouth, Hastings, Dumfries and beyond. These emergences were being done in spite of the system, rather than because of the system it and there were lots of changes that need to be made to take this agenda forward.

Nick highlighted why town centres and high streets are so important. They were a real source of civic pride, and the fate of one's High Street could really determine how people feel about a local area. The presence of particular retailers on a high street (such as a Marks & Spencer) forming people's perception of their local area.

The question to consider was how to move to a point where people's pride in their high street is not only governed by that [presence of a particular retailer] but instead by a diverse mix of use and businesses and different stakeholders playing a bigger role. They should be those hubs of activity that people know and feel comfortable in. There was scope for an increase in health and well-being hubs on the high street hosted by community businesses.

There was a range of different spaces that can act as a destination space and draw people to the high street. Examples of community businesses that were doing this:

- Bodmin in Cornwall, they have transformed the library into an event space which offers services for the local community, bringing people into the high street.
- The Town Hall in Hebden bridge, provides working space for local people
- Craft work sold in a community owned shop in Ashford, with creative activities draws people into the high street shopping centre.

These were single asset buildings that Nick felt were really inspiring. Nick gave an example of a project which he believed gave a real sense of opportunity when it comes to community and high streets. In Plymouth there is an organisation 'Nudge Community Builders' set up by two local people, which brings buildings back into use (that the market wouldn't otherwise go near) and therefore breathing new life into the high street. The organisation has been transforming Union Street a former bustling destination which had seen decline and rising property vacancy. There were however a number of challenges, one of which was the lack of clarity of who owned some of the derelict buildings that they were trying to bring into community ownership. This was often unclear, possibly due to buildings being owned by shell companies. Another challenge was that it could take up to five years for those buildings to become sustainable to the point where it could be funded by the trading activity undertaken with the building. The organisation therefore requires grant funding to support revenue costs while they establish and grow the community businesses.

The organisation has established a community market, pop up café, an alternative shopping arcade based on the concept of an allotment where they rent space patch by patch to local businesses and individuals who have an idea and want to grow it in a way that benefits the community in the wider high street.

Nick expressed the need for local authorities to have a role as a curator of town centres and thinking of themselves in that way, playing a role in linking communities to vacant properties, pushing for greater transparency on high street property, pushing for use of Meanwhile spaces (as a temporary solution). Local authorities having a role to play in flexible finance for establishing growth and sustainability of community business.

Nick felt there was real scope for collaboration between NHS, local government and community partners, both in the immediate term for things like vaccination programmes, but in the longer term too, noting the focus on community wealth building in Southwark and focus on anchor institutions. He also felt there was a real opportunity to harness

those local assets to build health into the fabric of the high streets in a way that also involves communities. He also referred to the local access partnership work in Southwark which he felt was an opportunity to think about how some of that might support communities to take on assets and provide a sustainable base for communities so that they can work into the future.

Nick talked about the High Streets agenda being led by the GLA. He informed the commission of an idea coming out of that initiative, 'the Good Landlords Charter' which was around thinking about how private developers and landowners can really support local community led activity. He reported on work Power to Change were doing in London with the GLA and Coops UK around a scheme which was to be imminently launched called 'Boosting Community Business London' programme which offers small grants for community businesses setting up in London. He believed there was scope for this to support community businesses on the high street. An element of this will involve community shares. The idea being that communities can pay an amount of money to support the organisation and then have an equity stake.

Ben Stephenson, provided the commission with a presentation on the national picture relating to high streets.

Ben informed the commission that one of the main metrics used to try to figure out what 's going on in high streets is footfall. There has been a cumulative problem with footfall ever since the last recession - down 20.5%, between 2010 and 2013. During the pandemic, it is less clear as people were not supposed to be out in the streets, but footfall was down 64% cents in 2020 and doesn't look like it's going to recover, early indications suggest because of habits formed during the lockdown, it's not really likely to return to pre pandemic levels.

The two major impacts on high streets were firstly out of town shopping and then more recently online shopping with a steady rise from 2007 until 2019, where one in five regional purchases made in the UK were made online. That slightly masks a bit of a disparity between the different sectors, in 2019 only 6.3% of grocery sales were made online, but due to the impact of 2020, online shopping has shot up by Q3, reaching 2030 predictions in a year. In November 2020, online shopping hit a high, 36% of all shopping/retail was online.

The way stores close was another really good indication of what is going on, it had been predicted that store closures would be slightly under 2000 in 2020, however 5214 stores closed in 2020 (multiples only), 1000 independents have closed. In 2021, 750 multiples have closed already.

Retail vacancy is the first major way that they try to figure out what's going on the high street. Retail vacancy of 10.3% in 2019, up to 13.2% in 2020. Shopping Centre vacancy is now at 16.3%. Expecting as furlough comes to an end in March, that picture is going to look far less rosy, 2021 is going to look particularly bad for retail vacancy, and we will start seeing big gaps in our high streets.

Ben pointed out that high streets were associated with shopping and that there was a need to start talking about diversity and looking at what high streets mean when we aren't talking about shopping, the office market, hospitality, culture and leisure particularly.

London Bridge was cited as an example of how badly the City has been affected, in terms of the knock on effect, in terms of the transport system and retail that goes along with this.

Only 7% of office workers in the recent study have said that they want to go back to working full time. If that is a request acceded to by employers then there were going to be some very interesting changes economically, particularly in city centres.

He noted that it was cheaper not commute to work and that it was more productive working at home for a lot of sectors, he was however struck by the testimonies given by the young people in the earlier session, in terms their experiences and reflected on the experience as a young person up to their mid 30s. He acknowledged that working on your own all day can be quite isolating and felt that younger people particularly need that connection with other people in the workplace to be able to climb the career ladder.

In respect of the UK hospitality sector, 660,000 of its 3.6 million jobs have already gone in the last year. One in three pubs, bars and restaurants are feared to close. The hotel markets have been badly affected. Areas such as London Bridge and other parts of Southwark are reliant on this type of local economy. Daily revenue is down to £29 per room compared to £129 in 2019. Culture and leisure have suffered 45% reduction in GVA compared to 2019. There was also the impact on the supplying sectors to those three main sectors. One of the things that is being thought about is how support has been targeted by government and how correctly targeted it has been.

All of this was happening against a wider backdrop of recession, climate change, Brexit and a lot of social upheaval. Ben felt that all of this puts us at a crossroads when thinking about the sustainability of high streets and how they are transforming over the years and decades.

Ben explained that there were forces pushing for change, particularly in terms of sustainability and change that delivers real social value. But there were also forces trying to push us back to the status quo as well. One of the forces for good as he described them was the High Streets Task Force which was set up last year with a five year programme. It consists of 13 membership organisations, including professional bodies, data partners, civic voices representing the community. It's purpose was to use data and expertise, to go into places and help them understand important partnerships, how to use data, and how to transform and identify your barriers to transformation.

Ben shared his thoughts on an idea about sustainability and purpose driven places. This was about creating frameworks that provide people with an interface within their town centre that would help them lead a purpose driven life. Trying to understand how the town centre can fulfil a number of purposes for a number of different kinds of people. Sustainable Development Goal 11 and Doughnut Economics were good places to start.

There was also the issue of devolving some power to neighbourhood level and there was a lot of work going in terms of inclusive citizens panels, community wealth building.

Ben talked about the interface with landlords (the local authority being a large landlord). He felt that the drive towards the idea of fiscal responsibility to maximise return, meant that you ended up with a very distinct lines drawn between what we do with our assets, this was true also of private sector and of our pension funds, where a lot of money is invested, he felt that the lesson to be learnt was that if we keep going the way we are, then there would be a gradual decline in the high streets. He felt what need to be done is for a much broader conversation with a much wider group of stakeholders about how we are going to start turning that around and that meant involving everyone in the community.

Following Nick and Ben's presentations members of the commission then followed up with

questions.

7. RESPONSE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EDUCATION AND BUSINESS SCRUTINY COMMISSION REPORT ON PROCUREMENT : ACCESSIBILITY AND SOCIAL VALUE JULY 2020 [CABINET REPORT]

This item was included with the agenda for information only.

RESOLVED:

That the response to the recommendations be noted.

8. UPDATE ON FAIRER FUTURE PROCUREMENT FRAMEWORK [CABINET REPORT]

This item was included with the agenda for information only.

RESOLVED:

That the cabinet report be noted.

9. EDUCATION AND LOCAL ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMISSION WORK PROGRAMME 2020-21

RESOLVED:

That the work programme as at 27 January 2021 be noted.

10. DIGITAL NHS STATISTICS - CHILDREN WITH PROBABLE MENTAL HEALTH DISORDER

This item was included with the agenda for information only.

The meeting ended at 9.12pm

CHAIR:

DATED: