



City of Westminster

# Business and Children's Policy and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 31 March 2022

Report of: Councillor Timothy Barnes

Portfolio: Cabinet Member for Young People and Learning

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## **1. Update on Bridging the Gap Pilot – supporting employability, mental health and emotional wellbeing support for 16-25-year-olds**

There has been extensive work to explore the alignment between Bridging the Gap and the Council's newly launching Changing Futures Programme, a central government-funded initiative to improve outcomes for young people experiencing multiple disadvantages. In addition to our engagement with young people, we have undertaken consultation with partners across the system. This provides an opportunity to reshape and extend the scope of the Bridging the Gap pilot to focus on a broader range of presenting needs across a narrower age range.

Changing Futures will support 18–25-year-olds who have an overlap of three or more of the following: homelessness, offending, substance misuse, mental health needs and domestic abuse. Bridging the Gap will continue to focus on holistic and integrated emotional wellbeing and employment service aimed at supporting transition to adulthood. It will now focus primarily on 16- and 17-year-olds and the reach of the service will extend to include those who are at risk of school exclusion, as well employability support. In recognition of this wider remit consideration is being given to whether the offer will be delivered via dedicated premises or satellite outreach. The pilot will strengthen links and services offered at schools, colleges, youth clubs, youth hubs, providers and libraries. The new delivery partner is due to be awarded a 2-year contract to soft launch in early summer. Additional health funding is also anticipated to support this programme.

## **2. Primary School Capacity**

In June 2020, ISOS Partnership was commissioned by the Schools Forum to undertake an independent review of the falling number of children in Westminster's primary schools and the related pressure this is placing on primary school finances. ISOS report put forward key recommendations, including the formation of a Strategic Working Group to include school leaders, both diocesan bodies and key officers. In the continued response to this review and its recommendations, the Council continues to work with local schools and diocesan bodies to address both surplus capacity and projected budget deficits. With the agreement of the Schools Forum, the Strategic Working Group has reconvened to review the recommendations to ensure that the strategies taken forward are sufficient and keep with the pace of the increasing surplus and pupil projections.

The statutory notice and formal consultation proposing the amalgamation of Westminster Cathedral and St Vincent de Paul RC Primary Schools concluded on 3rd February 2022. Whilst taking account of representation submitted, there were no counter strategies put forward to address falling rolls and budget deficits. The decision was made by Cllr Tim Barnes, Cabinet Member for Young People and

Learning to proceed with the amalgamation on 15th February 2022. Further to a call-in period, a request by the Policy and Scrutiny Committee Members was made to debate this decision. An Extraordinary Policy and Scrutiny Committee meeting took place on Monday 7th March. A vote concluded a majority of eight members to note the report, with three members voting to refer the decision back to the Cabinet Member. The decision by the Cabinet Member to approve the amalgamation stands and will now move forward to the implementation stage. A notice of the decision was published on 10th March 2022.

### **3. Support to Afghan Families and Home Office transfers**

The Home Office has notified the Council that the Metropole Hotel will not be able to host Afghan Evacuees from the end of March. The Council has been supporting the Home Office to move families to other bridging hotel accommodation in the UK and working with officials on policy considerations.

There are two phases to the moves of circa 600 evacuees. The first phase was concluded on 4 March and saw 260 evacuees (134 children) moved to 15 hotels across the country. We expect the second phase to take place in the week commencing 28 March with a first planning meeting scheduled next week on 15 March.

Alongside relocating evacuees to other hotels, families have also been receiving offers of permanent accommodation since October last year. In that time 45 families and 179 evacuees have moved out of the hotel, although we continue to have a significant issue with offers being rejected; 24 accommodation offers have been rejected by families, representing potentially another 100+ people who could have moved to their own homes. In response to the issue of rejected offers, the Home Office is expected to set out a formal policy early next week. After these moves, there are still around 330 evacuees (190 children) staying at the Hilton London Metropole.

Westminster has nominated two properties to the Home Office for matching to evacuee families, and the Council has resettled one Afghan family in the borough, with a second expected to move into their new home next week. Both families are receiving dedicated support from the Council's commissioned floating support service, and there is a weekly meeting involving officers from across the Council and partner agencies to ensure their needs are met.

### **4. Holiday Activity and Food HAF Fund and Household Support Fund**

Following the announcement from the Department for Education that Holiday Activity and Food Fund (HAF) is going to be funded for an additional three years, officers are now working on planning for Easter 2022. Westminster has been awarded £730k for 2022/23.

A steering group has been established, consisting of colleagues from Public Health, Short Breaks, Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) and the voluntary sector. Youth providers have been contacted and encouraged to submit an application to deliver Easter provision. The steering group will then evaluate these proposals and make the final funding decisions. In this way, services will be mobilised ahead of Easter. This approach strengthens our local relationships with the voluntary sector in the borough whilst also ensuring provision is local and easily accessible to children and their families. It also utilises established relationships with young people that our local voluntary sector relationships already have.

Alongside the HAF programme, officers have been working on the roll-out of the Household Support Fund in Westminster. This fund is the latest iteration of funds from the Department of Work and Pensions previously labelled 'Covid Winter Grant' and 'Covid Local Support Scheme', and is designed to support hardship needs across the country. Westminster has been awarded £1,951m of this funding for the period 6th October 2021 to 31st March 2022. The fund is now being managed corporately and has been used to fund a range of programmes; including £840,000 to support the

extra costs of the school holidays for children eligible for Free School Meals and vulnerable families (consisting of families who have no recourse to public funds, asylum seekers; Care Leavers; families that Early Help and Family Hubs support; and young people accessing the Integrated Gangs and Exploitation Unit (IGXU) and Youth Offending Services.

## **5. City Lions Annual Report Highlights**

Westminster's City Lions programme, which helps residents aged 13-16 get involved with cultural and creative opportunities across the borough, has recently published its annual report. In the past year, City Lions has worked with over 100 creative partners to deliver a variety of activities and support to over 1,100 young participants. These activities included holiday programmes that engaged 90 young people; five public art exhibitions and a creative industries festival. Feedback from these workshops and events has been overwhelmingly positive, with one parent sharing that *"Thank you so much, (my son) is honestly so happy. What a difference City Lions have made to him over the past year or so, you have given him so much confidence to believe in himself from this project."*

Through the City Lions Work Experience programme and the Mentoring programme, young people are supported to learn more about creative careers. 95% of young mentees on the Mentoring programme rated their sessions as 'excellent or 'good', and a participant on the Work Experience programme commented that *"I loved learning about the theatre industry and the tasks stretched my creative thinking and strengthened my organisation skills; so that's another option for my future career!"*

Due to its ongoing success, City Lions continues to expand its offerings for 2022-23 to make even more creative opportunities accessible to our young people.

## **6. Children's Mental Health Week and World Social Care Day**

During Children's Mental Health Week (7th-13th Feb 2022), the Council organised an initiative in City of Westminster College and Pimlico Academy to raise awareness about mental health and signpost young people to support available to them. We delivered 4,200 keyrings, posters and leaflets with QR codes to the Council's emotional wellbeing page, which were introduced to students through assemblies and workshops run by our partners- Mind and Kooth. Digital materials were also shared across all Westminster schools in forums, newsletters and at libraries and leisure centres. Feedback so far has been positive and the keyrings have been described as a *"great starter of conversations"* and a *"really good approach to engage young people"* (Mental Health and Wellbeing Officer, City of Westminster College).

Following the successful reception to these sessions, engagement leads have arranged to deliver workshops and assemblies at Harris Academy St John's Wood in the week commencing 21<sup>st</sup> March with a focus on dealing with exam stress.

We hosted an event for social workers and social care practitioners on World Social Care Day on 15 March. The theme was recognition, appreciation and thanks. The event involved reflecting on the ethos of "leaving no one behind" in connection with our value base and what makes social work so important.