



Krupesh Hirani AM
Chair of the Health Committee

Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London
(Sent by email)

CC: Joanne McCartney, Deputy Mayor for Children and Families

19 December 2022

Dear Sadiq,

Early years development and support services in London

I am writing to you in my position as Chair of the London Assembly Health Committee regarding the Committee's investigation into early years development and support services in London. This follows a meeting held by the Committee on 25 May 2022, which was attended by the following guests:

- **Joanne McCartney**, Deputy Mayor for Children and Families
- **Dr Tom Coffey OBE**, Mayoral Health Advisor
- **Vicky Hobart**, GLA Group Director of Public Health and Deputy Statutory Health Advisor
- **Sarah McMullen**, Director of Impact and Engagement, National Childbirth Trust (NCT)
- **Joe Lane**, Head of Policy, Action for Children
- **June O'Sullivan MBE**, Chief Executive, London Early Years Foundation
- **Jonathan Broadbery**, Director of Policy and Communications, National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)
- **Stella Ziolkowski**, Director of Quality and Training, NDNA

Our investigation aimed to understand how early childhood development has been affected by the pandemic and whether this impact has been felt disproportionately by particular groups of people. It also looked into how services that are crucial to providing support to young children and their families have been affected by the pandemic. The Committee asked what the Mayor's Health Inequalities Strategy and Implementation Plan can do to help address these issues, and scrutinised the Mayor's policies relating to early years.

Guests explained the importance of the first five years of a child's life for their long-term development. The health and educational outcomes for five-year-olds are a strong predictor of outcomes in later life. The Committee heard how inequalities begin to emerge in the early years of a child's life, and that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are already behind better-off children in terms of development at the age of five. It is therefore vital that a range of support is available for young children in London, in order to assist with their development and reduce health inequalities.

Impact of the pandemic on early years development

Evidence suggests that there have been delays to childhood development as a result of the pandemic. Research from the Education Endowment Foundation, published in May 2022 and highlighted by Joe Lane during the Committee's meeting, found that four- and five-year-olds were less likely to meet the expected levels of development in 2021 than before the pandemic.¹ Research from the Sutton Trust reached similar conclusions.² This is likely to have impacted children from disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately, as research has found that they stand to gain the most from interacting with early years services.³ The Committee also heard that children from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to have experienced digital exclusion, as these groups were less likely to access services delivered virtually during the pandemic.

In June 2021, Public Health England concluded that 'the risks to children's health, wellbeing and futures [as a consequence of the pandemic] are profound'.⁴ The long-term impact on the development of those who were aged 0-5 during the pandemic remains unclear. Tom Coffey told the Committee that 'targeted funding to that cohort of children is probably needed to increase the educational input to address those developmental delays'.⁵ However, guests at the Committee's meeting noted that the current evidence is inconclusive, and that more research is needed to understand the long-term impact in London in more depth.

Recommendation 1: *The long-term impact on the development of those who were aged 0-5 during the pandemic is unclear. The Mayor should work with the NHS and other partners through the London Health Board to conduct necessary research to understand this long-term impact on young children in London and determine whether ongoing targeted support is required to address developmental delay for this cohort.*

¹ Education Endowment Foundation, [Pandemic adversely affected young children's development, with fewer reaching expected levels by the end of reception class](#)

² Sutton Trust, [Early Years and Covid-19: The Parents' View](#)

³ Oxford Brookes University, [How missing out on nursery due to COVID has affected children's development – new research](#)

⁴ Public Health England, The impact of COVID-19 on London's children and young people, June 2021

⁵ [Agenda and minutes: Health Committee - Wednesday 25 May 2022 2.00pm](#)

Impact of the pandemic on early years providers and services

The Committee heard that the pandemic had a severe impact on early years providers in London. Joanne McCartney referenced research commissioned by the GLA, which found that in 2021 just 39 per cent of private early years providers and 21 per cent of voluntary early years providers were in financial surplus.⁶ Meanwhile, Ofsted data shows that between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022, there was a net overall decrease of around 4,000 childcare providers (including individual childminders) nationally, representing a fall of 6 per cent on previous year.⁷

Guests agreed that the pandemic had exacerbated staff shortages in the early years sector, particularly in nurseries. Some staff were forced to find other forms of employment during the pandemic and did not return to the sector. June O’Sullivan told the Committee: “We are so short-staffed, it is the worst I have ever known it, and I have been in this game for over 20 years”.⁸ As a result of this, nurseries are struggling to meet demand from parents. Stella Ziolkowski also reported that there has been a gradual reduction since 2015 in the number of nursery staff with a Level 3 qualification, meaning that more staff are working in early years settings with lower qualification levels. This is concerning, particularly given the importance of early years settings in supporting children who experienced developmental delays during the pandemic.

Joanne McCartney noted that the GLA convenes an early years stakeholder group, and that this group was due to discuss workforce issues at its next meeting. The Committee would welcome an update on whether specific actions to address these issues emerged from the meeting. Given that the Adult Education Budget is delegated to the Mayor in London, he has a key role to play in ensuring that London’s skills system is delivering the skills needed by the early years sector. In her letter to the Committee after the meeting, Joanne McCartney noted that: “During the 2020–21 academic year [...] a total of 62 courses related to child development and wellbeing were delivered through the Mayor’s Adult Education Budget (AEB), with 4,780 participants supported”. This is very welcome.

However, it is clear from the evidence received by the Committee that there are still glaring skills gaps across the sector, which the Mayor could help address. June O’Sullivan told the Committee that she would like to see a London-wide campaign to encourage more people, and particularly young men, to work in the early years sector. Such a campaign could promote apprenticeships and other forms of training in the sector. In response to a survey of childcare and early years providers, carried out by the Department for Education in 2021, providers reported 97 per cent of paid staff as female whilst 99 per cent of childminders identified as female.⁹

Recommendation 2: *The Mayor, in consultation with the GLA’s early years stakeholder group, should identify where the main skills gaps are in the early years sector and target Adult Education Budget funding in these areas.*

⁶ Early Years Alliance and CEEDA, [Strong Early Years London: Impact Report](#)

⁷ Ofsted, [Main findings: childcare providers and inspections as at 31 March 2022](#)

⁸ [Agenda and minutes: Health Committee - Wednesday 25 May 2022 2.00pm](#)

⁹ Department for Education, [Survey of Childcare and Early Year Providers: Main Summary](#)

Recommendation 3: *The Mayor, in consultation with the GLA’s early years stakeholder group, should carry out a London-wide campaign to encourage more people, particularly young men, to work in the early years sector.*

Strong Early Years London programme

The Committee questioned Joanne McCartney on the impact on the Strong Early Years programme, which was funded by the Mayor and delivered by the Early Years Alliance, and provided business support to the early years and childcare sector from May 2021 to March 2022. After the meeting, Joanne McCartney shared the independent impact report on the programme with the Committee. This report found that the programme supported 1,344 early years providers and was ‘successful in promoting awareness of support, tackling some of the barriers to access, increasing take-up of support and achieving positive impact for nurseries and pre-schools in London’.¹⁰ It also highlighted some lessons learnt and areas for improvement, particularly around the ‘one stop shop website’ and the need to improve support for childminders.

The Deputy Mayor’s letter to the Committee stated that the Mayor would grant additional funding to the Early Years Alliance until November 2022, ‘in order to improve the accessibility of the one stop shop and ensure its longer-term sustainability’. However, it is unclear whether the programme will be funded beyond this point. Given that parts of the programme were deemed to be successful, and given the challenges facing the early years sector highlighted at the Committee’s meeting, the Committee believes it should be extended and improved upon.

Recommendation 4: *The Mayor should extend the Strong Early Years London programme. This should build on the successes of the first iteration of the programme and make changes based on the areas for improvement identified in the evaluation report.*

Healthy Early Years London programme

The Committee questioned Joanne McCartney and Vicky Hobart on the impact of the Healthy Early Years London programme, an awards scheme funded by the Mayor of London which supports and recognises achievements in child health, wellbeing and development in early years settings. Members noted that the GLA published an evaluation report into the first year of the programme in 2019, but has not published an equivalent report since then. Vicky Hobart told the Committee that during the pandemic priorities had shifted to other areas, but that ‘there is certainly a lot more bandwidth [now] to re-engage in that programme’. The Mayor publishes data on the number of settings that have received a Healthy Early Years London award.¹¹ However, this does not tell us about the impact and outcomes of the programme.

Recommendation 5: *The Mayor should carry out a full evaluation of the Healthy Early Years London programme, in order to understand what impact it is having and how it can be improved.*

¹⁰ Ofsted, [Main findings: childcare providers and inspections as at 31 March 2022](#)

¹¹ [MQT on 2022-06-23: Healthy Early Years Settings](#)

The Committee would welcome a response to this letter by Friday 9 February 2023. Please send your response by email to the Committee's Clerk, Diane Richards (diane.richards@london.gov.uk)

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Krupesh Hirani', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Krupesh Hirani AM
Chair of the Health Committee