



At Richmond PCF we have been deeply saddened, but unfortunately not surprised by the recent auditors' report. We are compiling a formal response with recommendations and will distribute this to the Committee once it has been finalised.

With the current extra-ordinary circumstances I don't think that we have ever been more aware of the consequences of a child or young person missing out on their education, but this is reality for some and the risk for many children with SEND in our Borough.

With the publication of this report we must face the reality that the failures in our SEND support systems are current, they are real and vulnerable children are routinely not receiving the support that they need and are entitled to.

I regret the necessity of addressing the committee in this way, but I have a responsibility to convey the views of the parents that we represent. They feel cheated and let down by the time barring applied to the audit process. It has been viewed as a deliberate attempt to avoid full accountability and deepened mis-trust between some parents and the Local Authority. Evidence of this mis-trust is found in parents' unwillingness to engage with this audit process, although the Council's failure to adequately plan for and coherently roll out the audit is a considerable contributory factor.

While we understand that there were misunderstandings with the Ombudsman regarding timescales, we would like to know why preparations for the audit and preliminary checks on school/college enrolment and attendance did not begin on receipt of the report in October of last year. We would also like to query why this committee wasn't convened following publication of the Ombudsman's report to provide the proper and public scrutiny it warranted and decide how to proceed in a transparent and collaborative way, and in the best interests of the children concerned.

The decision of the Committee to re-commission AfC in full knowledge of the Ombudsman's concerns has shocked and alarmed many parents. While the PCF acknowledge the complexity of these arrangements, we would ask the Committee to also acknowledge that offering an additional 5 year contract to a company now proven to have failed in its delivery of SEND services is unlikely to inspire confidence in affected families. Would this Committee please confirm how the necessary improvements will be ensured and what contingency is in place if this is not achieved?

Parents of children with SEND are under no illusions about the challenges of service delivery in the current financial climate, however this does not change the moral and legal responsibility we share with you to safeguard the welfare and interests of the precious children in our care.

There are many dedicated individuals, both within AfC and elsewhere, who work hard every day to support our children and strive tirelessly to navigate and eliminate the deficiencies in our SEND services. To them we offer our heartfelt gratitude and thanks. In Richmond there is a lot to celebrate – our tenacious and resourceful parent community, our fantastic schools and our committed and talented voluntary sector. These great strengths however can mask the seriousness of the problems within our statutory services and the growing inequalities in the support available to some of our most vulnerable families. I know we can be better, but to move forward we must first openly and honestly acknowledge where we are. Thank you.