

VCS Children and Youth Forum

Tuesday 16 December 2025

Attendance: 19 people in person and 8 online

Agenda

1. Safeguarding training and faith-based safeguarding overview.
2. SENDIASS, Family Information Service and Local Offer updates.
3. Therapeutic services, Toyhouse.
4. Early years and specialist SEND provision, Family Hubs.
5. Young Elite mentoring and coaching service.
6. Gaps in SEND and CYP provision.
7. Digital safeguarding and AI risks.
8. Next steps.

1. Safeguarding training and faith-based safeguarding overview

Rajna Choudhury provided an overview of her role as Children's Interfaith Safeguarding Coordinator and Safeguarding Chair.

Key points included:

- Works closely with faith organisations across Tower Hamlets, linking them with Children's Social Care and Early Help.
- Provides consultation where abuse is suspected, including cases of faith-based abuse.
- Supports organisations to build strong safeguarding cultures and ensure compliance with national legislation and Charity Commission requirements.
- Faith organisations are often voluntary or charitable bodies and therefore overlap significantly with the wider VCS sector.
- Training offered includes Level 1 safeguarding, as well as specialist training on domestic abuse, contextual safeguarding and harm outside the home.
- Workshops are also delivered to parents on keeping children safe in afterschool clubs, holiday provision and online spaces.
- Emphasis placed on information sharing and learning from serious case reviews to prevent harm before escalation.
- Joint safeguarding training with Tower Hamlets Safeguarding Partnership planned for the new year.

Discussion followed on safeguarding training provision:

- Current offer includes Tower Hamlets-specific Level 1 training and London-wide safeguarding partnership training.
- Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) training had previously been commissioned (including NSPCC training) but stopped post COVID due to low uptake and loss of budget.
- DSL training could be recommissioned if sufficient demand is demonstrated.
- Education settings access separate DSL training through the education safeguarding team.
- Organisations were asked to share training needs (including DSL) with Sheba.
- A safeguarding policy template will be located, updated and shared via the website in the new year.
- Details of the Children's Interfaith safeguarding co-ordinator and how to contact SQA for advice will be shared. Rajna noted that immediate concerns should be shared to MAST.

2. SENDIASS service overview

Jenny Miller introduced the SENDIASS service and wider participation work.

Key points included:

- SENDIASS provides independent, impartial information, advice and support for parents and young people regarding special educational needs and disability.
- The service acts as a bridge between families and the local authority.
- SEN Parent Ambassadors are a volunteer group of parents who represent parent voices at a strategic level and share information back with families.
- “Our Time” Young People’s Forum consists of young people aged 14–25 with additional needs, with strong regional and national recognition.
- The group contributes to coproduction work, development of a borough coproduction charter, and involvement in service design and recruitment processes.
- Presentations and the annual report have been shared with Sheba for circulation.

2 continued - Family Information Service and Local Offer update

Krupali Shah provided an overview of the Family Information Service (FIS) and Local Offer.

Family Information Service:

- Statutory service providing information on childcare (nurseries, wraparound care, holiday provision).

- Manages information relating to the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme.
- Maintains a boroughwide service directory with approximately 1,000 services.
- Operates a dedicated phone line Monday to Friday and receives a wide range of enquiries.

Local Offer:

- Statutory digital platform hosting SEND and family service information.
- Includes service directory, news and events, SEND guidance (including autism), and the annual “Summer Fun” programme.

New digital platform:

- Being developed jointly with Family Hubs.
- Expected to launch in early 2026 (February/March indicative).
- Will include user profiles, AI-supported searching, provider portals for events and services, and integrated information across family support services.
- Family consultation will take place prior to launch.

3. Toy House – Special Early Family Support service

Pip Pinhorn from [Toy House](#) presented their early intervention and family support services.

Key points included:

- Based in St Paul's Way and established in 1979, with SEND services delivered since 1992.
- Focus on early support, attachment, play-based development and family wellbeing.
- Special Early Family Support service works from pregnancy (20week scan) until a child's second birthday.
- Supports families where a child has, or is expected to have, complex medical or developmental needs.
- Homebased support includes emotional support, play resources, practical guidance and links to local services.
- Support is needs-led with no fixed duration.
- Funding ends at age two, after which families typically transition into education or health services.

4. Early years SEND provision – Children and Family Centres

Nicola Page and Harumi Welford presented on the wide range of services offered by Family Hubs:

- Early intervention support for children under five.
- Programmes include Little Talkers, Understanding Autism, Play & Connect, Explore & Connect, Learn & Connect (parenting), sensory play, Understanding Emotions Together, sleep workshops, SEND coffee mornings, group assessments, British Sign Language groups and sensory room sessions.
- Services delivered across four localities in Tower Hamlets.
- Referrals managed via early years managers.
- High demand noted for many programmes.

The Family Hubs can advertise the services of voluntary and community groups and give out leaflets. Harumi suggested a presentation about the new digital platform at the next meeting.

5. Young Elite – mentoring and coaching service

Rohan Cook presented on behalf of Young Elite.

Key points included:

- Mentoring and coaching service for young people aged 8–18 across Tower Hamlets.
- Works in partnership with youth services, schools and UCFB Wembley for sports coaching.
- Offers one-to-one mentoring, group sessions (up to 10 participants) and sports-based engagement.
- Supports neurodiverse young people including those with autism and ADHD.
- Coaches receive safeguarding and Prevent training.
- Young people can self-refer via a referral form.
- Support programmes range from four weeks to twelve months.
- Taster sessions and volunteering opportunities are available.

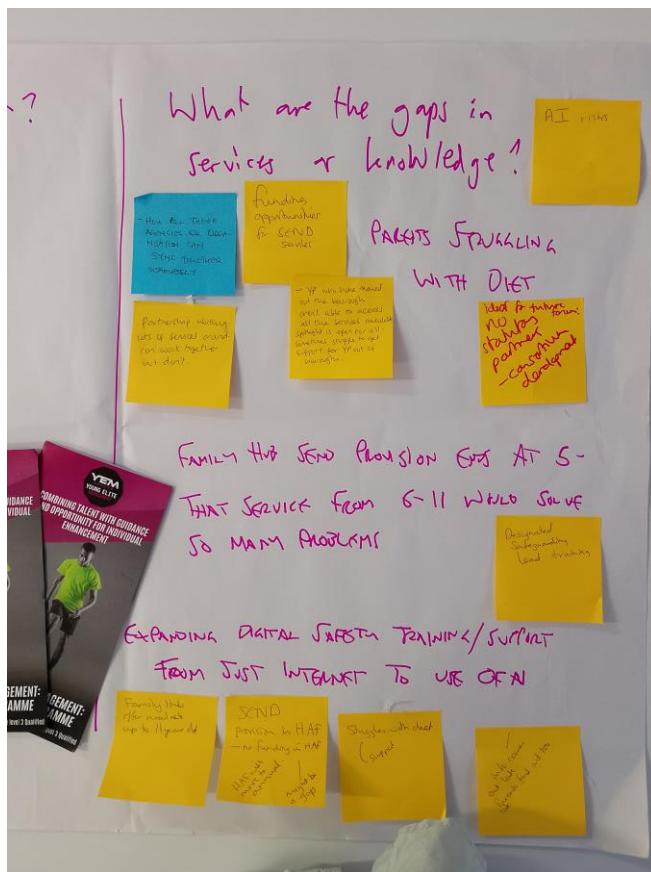
6. Gaps in SEND and CYP provision

There was a group discussion focused on gaps in current provision, particularly around SEND.

Key themes included:

- Limited SEND provision within the HAF programme, with only a small number of specialist providers currently available.
- Information about holiday provision often released late, limiting preparation time for families and providers.

- A new online booking system for HAF is planned for next year, which may improve access and coordination.
- Significant gap in support for older children (5–19) with neurodiversity, particularly around feeding, diet and sensory-related difficulties.
- Short funding windows and complex application processes remain challenging for small organisations.



Update on funding opportunities

- The council's Youth Empowerment Fund (up to £3,000 for organisations with turnover under £150,000) is currently underspent.
- CVS can support organisations to apply.
- Details to be circulated by Sheba.

AOB

A contribution was made regarding emerging digital safeguarding risks:

- Increasing use of AI in apps, platforms and children's toys raises concerns around data privacy, regulation and child safety.

- Regulation is not keeping pace with technological change.
- Work is being undertaken to train parents, youth workers and professionals on emerging risks.
- Information will be shared via the Children and Young People services newsletter.

There was a discussion about the Forum. It was thought that to create a bit more space for discussion we could limit statutory presentations to 3 minutes, like 'speed dating'. One person thought that the age range was quite large and wondered if it could be even more specific (i.e. concentrate on young people only).

Next steps and actions

- Sam Crosby to circulate presentations and materials shared during the meeting.
- All organisations to share safeguarding and training needs (including DSL training) with Sheba.
- Safeguarding team to update and publish safeguarding policy templates.
- Sheba / CVS to circulate information on the Youth Empowerment Fund.
- Family Information Service and Family Hubs to continue engagement ahead of the new digital platform launch.
- Digital safeguarding information to be included in the CYP newsletter.