

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 17 January 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Adam Carter (Chair), George Coxshall (Vice-Chair), Alex Anderson, Paul Arnold, Martin Kerin and Srikanth Panjala

Sarah Barlow, Church of England Representative
Nicola Cranch, Parent Governor Representative

Apologies:

In attendance:

Priscilla Bruce-Annan, Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business Manager
Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills
Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help
Andrea Winstone, Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND
Rhiannon Whiteley, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Youth Cabinet Representative
Angela Surrey – Youth Worker

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting may be filmed and was being recorded, with the audio recording to be made available on the Council's website.

11. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 November 2022 were approved as a correct record.

12. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

13. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

14. Youth Cabinet Update

The Youth Cabinet representative presented the report. She explained that The Mayor Councillor J Halden and Councillor B Johnson attended the Youth Cabinet's November meeting to explain their roles and answer any questions

the Youth Cabinet Members had. The Mayor offered the Youth Cabinet the use of the Council Chamber for their monthly meetings.

Councillor M Coxshall joined the meeting at 19.02

The Youth Cabinet Representative stated that the article that went out about the Member of Youth Parliaments visit to the House of Commons (see Appendix 1) resulted in 85 clicks to the Thurrock Council Youth Cabinet webpage. This was the second highest link click stat in that week's edition. Members were very pleased with the stat result as it indicates that 85 people are interested in what they are doing.

The Youth Cabinet Representative explained that they are still looking to grow the number of members of the Youth Cabinet. The Youth Cabinet Representative highlighted that another wellbeing walk will be taking place in February half term.

Councillor Kerin thanked the Youth Cabinet for the work that they do and confirmed that he supported the recruitment of more members as the more voices they hear, the better. Councillor Kerin noted the priority campaign is the cost of living and health and asked what support they needed to push the campaign.

The Youth Worker stated that they are currently building the campaign and it will be released in March, she thanked Councillor Kerin for the offer of help. The meeting discussed the Youth Cabinet Members involvement in working with the Local Plans Manager regarding the local plan.

The Chair queried how accessible the information on the Local Plan was for Youth Cabinet Members.

The Youth Cabinet Representative responded that it did take her a while to understand and how it impacts the environment and commented that she is grateful to be working on it. The Youth Worker added that the Local Plans Manager had really broken it down for them. She used slides which were easily accessible and they played games and used mind maps to get Youth Cabinet Members really engaged.

15. Overview of Responsibilities of Portfolio holder for Children's Services - Verbal update

Councillor B Johnson gave a verbal update as Portfolio holder for Children and Education.

Councillor B Johnson confirmed there is only one school that remains under the direct control of the Local Authority and that all other schools in Thurrock are Academies or Multi-trusts. However, the Local Authority continues to be closely involved with all schools and the Director and Assistant Director attend fortnightly meetings with the CEO's and School Headteachers. The Schools

Appeals process for admissions remains with the Local Authority and Home to School transport. He urged members to become familiar with Thurrock's Home to School transport policy.

Councillor B Johnson highlighted that he is looking forward to being a Judge on Thurrock's Next Top Boss. He also noted that the Summer holiday activity programme is continuing and they have 13,000 spaces on offer.

Councillor B Johnson stated that one of the hardest decisions that has come across his desk was the necessary closure of 2 nurseries in Tilbury which could have caused a problem for the Community. He was pleased to confirm that they have not received any complaints from parents that they haven't been able to obtain a nursery place for their child.

Councillor B Johnson confirmed that Home to School transport remains a real challenge, they continue to look at ways they can reduce the spend whilst not putting children at risk. A further challenge is the increase in Educational Healthcare Plans (EHCP's), Thurrock currently has in excess of 2000 plans.

Councillor B Johnson explained that the Social Care and Early Help service are in a constant state of alert to be prepared for external regulatory Ofsted inspections but continues to support children, young people and families to ensure they receive the right service at the right time. Councillor B Johnson reminded the committee that as elected members they are all corporate parents.

Councillor Johnson commented that he is very proud that in April 2022 Thurrock was chosen as one of 75 Local Authorities to join the Start For Life Family Hubs programme.

Councillor B Johnson highlighted that some of the challenges the service face is that they are now required by the Home Office to accept 45 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker children which is up from 31. They are also having difficulty recruiting more foster carers which is a national issue too.

Councillor B Johnson recalled attending an enjoyable evening event in October to celebrate foster carer's achievements and met a foster carer who had been fostering children in Thurrock for 40 years which he described as a humbling experience.

The Youth Offending Service was inspected by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) this year and was rated as Good.

Councillor Anderson asked about gang activity and queried what Councillor B Johnson is doing within his own portfolio to help tackle that issue in the borough.

Councillor B Johnson responded that it does cross over into other portfolio areas in terms of stopping it but the main job in this portfolio is identifying the children that are vulnerable and trying to stop them going down that route.

The Director of Children's Services added that when they become aware the children are normally involved or on the edge of becoming involved. They have preventative workers in YOS and a gang lead who reach out to predominantly young boys. In Children's Services families can struggle with the behaviours their children are exhibiting and social workers can become involved where there is danger of exploitation and work with families to put in as much support as possible to get young people on another course.

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that the LSCP have completed a thematic review on youth violence and there are actions from that plan which they are putting into place. They have also received funding from the Violence and Vulnerability Board for a worker to go into schools and work with children. They are also putting in extra training for social workers.

Councillor Kerin thanked Councillor B Johnson for the verbal update and queried whether there will be a Portfolio Holder report for 2022/ 23 for the next Committee meeting.

Councillor B Johnson responded that he believed he had to be invited but he was happy to attend the next meeting.

Councillor Kerin queried what are the main issues discussed at the fortnightly meeting with Schools.

Councillor B Johnson responded that the main issue was during Covid and issues such as lack of staff.

The Director for Children Services confirmed they often discuss the local issues going on at that moment. At the last meeting the Public Health Director came along and discussed Strep A. The school's really value the forum and in Covid the meeting took place weekly.

The Assistant Director of Education updated the Committee that 120 places will not be offered in September 2023 at Orsett Heath because the building is not ready. Other schools have already offered to take classes. She confirmed that the department is working hard to offer enough school places.

Councillor Kerin queried what the future is for Grangewaters.

Councillor B Johnson said he does not have an update on this but reassured the Committee that all the services offered by Grangewaters could be offered by Stubbers Adventure Centre.

Councillor Kerin queried what services will be affected by the Council's financial situation.

Councillor B Johnson responded that statutory services will not be affected and the majority of the services in the portfolio are statutory. Everything else will be looked at but he cannot say anymore than that at the current time.

The Assistant Director for Education confirmed that the school holidays activity programme is funded by Central Government so children on school meals are offered a range of activities. It is therefore up to Central Government. She added that the take up has been really positive.

The Chair confirmed a report will be brought to the next Committee meeting regarding the impact of the budget and savings on the portfolio.

Councillor Arnold raised the issue of children being placed in schools far away from their home.

Councillor B Johnson confirmed the Schools or Academies make the decision and the Council are left with the appeals. He confirmed that they talk to Schools regularly to try and understand their admissions policies.

Councillor Arnold asked for an update on the Oak Tree Centre. The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that a capital bid has been put in and improvement works are taking place.

Councillor Kerin asked about recruitment of foster carers.

Councillor B Johnson confirmed it is hard work being a parent to your own children and therefore you have to be a certain type of person to foster. Thurrock do pay the Council Tax for foster carers but money is not the reason why foster carers do the job they do.

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that foster carers an ageing population, Covid caused a lot of people to look at their priorities. Some foster carers moved out of Thurrock and some retired or stopped fostering. She reiterated that it does take a special type of person to foster and difficulties in recruiting more foster carers is a national issue.

Councillor Kerin thanked Councillor B Johnson for attending the meeting and answering the questions and added that it had been a really useful exercise.

Councillor G Coxshall noted that there are over 2000 EHCP's now in the Borough and queried how timely the EHCP's are completed.

The Assistant Director for Education confirmed that they ended the year with 55 % completed within 20 weeks. The past year has been challenging and they have had staff that have left; however they are reliant on a range of other partners to obtain information to complete the plan. They are now fully staffed and are hoping to improve on the figures this year. There has been an increase in EHCP plans, a lot of little children missed out on playgroups where they would have developed speech and language and social skills.

The Chair queried what is being done to retain foster carers and other key workers in early years.

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help responded that they constantly look at what they can do differently. They consulted with the foster carers and asked them what mattered to them. They offer an out of hours service for foster carers and will provide additional support to them if requested. They also celebrate the work they do.

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help stated that recruitment of social workers is also a national issue. They support their social workers by ensuring they have the right case loads, regular supervision and training and they also have a retention policy to try and keep social workers. There is a recruitment campaign out now for newly qualified social workers. Thurrock also has agency workers who have converted from agency to permanent which is very positive.

The Director of Children's Services confirmed that the Government is imminently about to publish their response to the Independent Social Work review by Josh McAlister and workforce and fostering are likely to be key areas that will be looked at.

The Chair suggested a report on this is discussed in the work programme item.

16. Verbal Update on Family Hubs/ Start for Life

The Strategic Lead for the Youth Offending Service and Prevention provided a verbal update. The Committee were updated that they have completed the required delivery plan and submitted it to the Department of Education on 6th January 2023 and they are currently waiting for the funding to be released. The feedback received from the Government is that they have a good understanding of the programme. A multi-disciplinary board has been set up to monitor the delivery of the programme and a number of work streams to oversee the delivery of the programme. A recruitment process has also started for the additional staff.

Councillor Kerin thanked the Strategic Lead for the Youth Offending Service and Prevention for the update.

17. Educational Attainment Data 2021- 22

The Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and Special Educational Needs / Disabilities presented the report and confirmed that it is a good news story. Thurrock's Looked After Children and SEND children have done very well compared to their peers nationally. The early years children have not done as well as they have done previously, and this has been put down to the pandemic and lost opportunities for socialising and attending early years settings.

Councillor Anderson asked about the virtual school.

The Director for Children's Services confirmed they have a Statutory duty towards all Thurrock Looked After Children and therefore the Headteacher of the virtual school is another layer of looking at what these children need and they will go into the children's schools to support and challenge them to ensure the children get what they need.

Councillor Kerin queried why disadvantaged children aren't beating the national average.

The Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and Special Educational Needs / Disabilities confirmed they are slightly behind the national average. They will attract the pupil premium and the national tutoring funding too.

The Assistant Director for Education stressed that attendance is a key priority and children need to be in school. They are having termly meetings with schools to look at attendance.

Councillor G Coxshall queried what is being done to support early years children.

The Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and Special Educational Needs / Disabilities responded that the Council is working with all early years settings delivering free training on speech and language to upskill practitioners and improve outcomes for children.

Councillor Arnold queried the work being done to improve young children's social skills.

The Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and Special Educational Needs / Disabilities confirmed that after the pandemic schools quickly realised children's physical fitness and social skills had been affected and children are not ready to learn until they are happy in school. Therefore, the two terms after that were used to work on the development of children's social skills.

Councillor Panjala queried what is the action plan to improve Key Stage 4 levels as they are below the national average.

The Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and Special Educational Needs / Disabilities confirmed they are closing the gap. The Teaching School Hub looks at school improvement and are identifying schools that need extra support. Leadership support and teacher training can be provided. The Assistant Director of Education also highlighted the need to give children at that age options such as apprenticeships and skills as not all of them will go down the further education route.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee receive the provisional outcomes of the summer 2022 tests and examinations and commends early years' settings, schools, pupils, and parents/carers on their achievements.**
- 1.2 Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee recognises the impact of Covid on our youngest children and how we are looking to support our early sector.**
- 1.3 Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee formally thank our early years, school and colleges settings for the work that has ensured a range of positive outcomes for our children and young people.**

18. Progress Update on Peer Review and Case Review - Action Plans

The Local Safeguarding Children Partnership Business Manager presented the report to the Committee.

Councillor Arnold stated that he attended the Walk Online Roadshow and commented that it was very informative. He urged anyone who has not been to attend it as he was shocked to hear what children were exposed to and it is really important for parents to be engaged.

Councillor Kerin queried the progress of the actions from the thematic review on Serious Youth Violence.

The Local Safeguarding Children Partnership Business Manager confirmed there are 6 recommendations, and each recommendation has sub-sections. Agencies are starting to work on the actions pending this being signed off in March. The Local Safeguarding Children Partnership Business Manager confirmed she doesn't have the action plan with her so she cannot elaborate on the detail further tonight but progress is being made.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Committee note the update on the work of the LSCP and the progress made on Action Plans to date.**

19. Work Programme

The Committee discussed the items to be added to the March work programme which will be the Portfolio holder report, an update report on the Government's response to the Independent Social Work Review and a report on the budget and savings.

The Chair decided that an extraordinary meeting will be necessary for the reports on the Re-procurement of the Homes to School Transport Contracts and the Capital Schools programme as these will need to be heard before the Cabinet meeting on the 15th March 2023.

The meeting finished at 8.59 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk**