

MINUTES of the meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 19 November 2009 at 7.00pm.

Present: Councillors John Everett (Chair), Diana Hale and Marion Canavon.

Patricia Wilson, Emma Woods and David Rollins.

Apologies: Councillors Anne Cheale, Ian Harrison and Lynn Worrall.

In attendance: C Stewart – Head of Business (Policy, Performance and Resources)
C Tinkler – Head of School Improvement
J Imray – Head of Children's, Health and Social Care
R Minto – Service Manager
J Olsson – Corporate Director of Children, Education and Families Services
L Marks - Solicitor
M Boulter- Principal Democratic Services Officer

Councillor Everett nominated himself as Chair for the meeting, which was seconded by Emma Woods.

33. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 22 October 2009, were approved as a correct record subject to the following amendments:

- Stifford Primary School be changed to read Stifford Clays Junior.
- Lay members be moved into the committee attendance section as opposed to the general attendance section.

34. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

No interests were declared.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

35. UPDATE ON REVISED SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY

The Committee was informed that there had been significant issues at key stage 2 and that after July's SATs results, officers were working to implement a new improvement strategy. One of the major concerns of officers was the introduction of a new Ofsted framework, which would impact on how schools were assessed.

The different categories in which schools could be graded were explained to the Committee and it was clarified that there was only one Thurrock school in category 5 (the category that represented those schools in Ofsted category). Ten schools were in category 2 and seventeen in category 3. Nine schools were in the less severe categories of 1 and 2.

The aim of officers was to focus on improving those schools in categories four and five by September 2009. Officers were liaising with those head teachers to see what support they needed to improve their performance. The council was aware of the long term nature of this issue and were ensuring that the schools would be able to sustain improvement and performance in future years. This was being achieved by looking at best practice in other councils, working with the University of East London to increase teacher training and development and also, reorganising the council's team of officers to provide more focussed support.

Officers clarified that the council team was different to the School Improvement Partners (SIPS) work, who were allocated 5 days per school each year. The day to day improvement work would be undertaken by council officers. It was added upon further questioning that category three schools did not necessarily have small pupil numbers.

In response to a question officers stated that the regional strategy team, which helped the council in this area of work, was free but would probably finish in 2011 when new legislation came into force.

The Chair asked what the main reasons for poor performance in schools were and it was replied that the two main issues were the absence of good leadership and the quality of teaching in every class, every day. Officers highlighted that a number of Thurrock schools did not have a permanent head teacher or had a new head teacher. It was the aim of the Council to attract good leaders to these positions by federating schools and offering higher salaries. With regards to improving the teaching quality, officers returned to the collaborative work with the University of East London.

A discussion took place on the use of clusters to pool teaching resources and to use secondary school teachers to raise specialism in primary schools. Officers were developing this area but it was highlighted that these arrangements still needed strong leadership to be successful. The use of Trusts was also briefly discussed and it was stated that two primary schools in Thurrock were due to be part of a trust. In terms of federation Thurrock was

due to have one in the near future and there was also a collaboration between two schools already.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

36. UPDATE ON THE PUPIL REFERRAL UNIT (PRU) AND PUPIL SUPPORT SERVICE (PSS)

The Pupil Support Service (PSS) was composed of five discreet services although their work did overlap in order to provide the most comprehensive support to children. One of these services was the Primary Mental Health team.

Those children that were permanently excluded from school were the responsibility of the Council although there were cases where pupils used the PRU as a 'time out' placement from their school. This was a situation whereby a pupil who was in a mainstream school, who was having difficulties, could use the PRU for half a term or more (depending on their needs). The challenge that the Council was facing was that the PRU was becoming logged with pupils that had entered the unit for a 'time out' placement but had stayed due to subsequent assessments on their needs. As a result the Council was bringing in an experienced consultant to review the PRU in Thurrock and to support the changes that were needed to make it a more efficient service.

A discussion was had on how pupils were funded in the PRU and it was explained that the funding schools received for each child then followed that child wherever they went. Some Members highlighted that provision and resources in the PRU were not of a good standard and officers replied that if the Building Schools for the Future funding was secured, there would be funding to invest in the PRU. Officers added that it was important for the PRU to be used for time out placements rather than permanent placements.

Councillor Canavon asked whether an introduction of financial penalties for schools to refer pupils to the PRU would reduce the use of the PRU. It was responded that the exclusion of pupils in schools was a complex issue and could be attributed to its impact on teacher moral, classroom culture, as well as the head teacher's philosophy. There was no evidence that any school used the PRU as a convenient place to move troublesome pupils, so it was doubtful financial penalties would have an effect. It was added that Thurrock council needed to improve its working relationship with schools, so the introduction of financial penalties could well damage progress in this area.

Following a question it was stated that GCSE results for PRU pupils were good, although because of the small number of pupils involved, performance could vary between years. The aim of the PRU was to re-engage pupils in education.

It was further discussed that PRU pupils did not generally have a difficulty in securing work but, as with the whole of Thurrock, there was a challenge on what those jobs were and the prospects for them. The 14-19 Plan would help improve job prospects because it would allow teachers and the Council to shape the curriculum to suit pupils' needs. There were also projects such as the Engagement Project, which allowed pupils to spend two days in school and three in a work placement to gain practical as well as academic skills. This project had been very successful and well attended.

RESOLVED: That

The report be noted.

37. FOSTERING REPORT OUTLINING PROCESS AND PERFORMANCE

The report outlined the immediate priorities for the service. In general the service was performing well in key areas and in comparison with other councils. For example, the service was keeping residential accommodation down and keeping a good rate of placement stability and keeping young people in their placements.

There was a challenge to recruit new foster carers, especially because there was a national shortage and Thurrock was competing with other councils. The key to successful recruitment was to provide the right support services to new carers. The Council was good at keeping its carers but many were reaching retirement age.

The Council needed to develop the following areas:

- Develop the private fostering service
- Change the name of the supported lodgings service to accurately reflect the good and important work it did
- Separate the recruitment and assessment functions of the service to provide a more efficient service to carers.

With regards to reducing the number of young people who had received more than three moves since 1st April, the Chair noted that there had been a dramatic improvement. Officers said they were pleased with the performance and stated that it had arisen from a genuine improvement in stability for the young people and their placements.

The cost of £500 per placement per week was broken down for the Committee and it was noted that only around £120 went to the carers, the remainder went to the cost of support services. This was roughly the same cost as other councils. Although, it was added that carers of young people requiring more therapeutic care were remunerated slightly higher.

With regards to 3.9 of the report, Councillor Canavon asked officers how families that made private foster arrangements notified the Council and were aware of their obligations to do so. It was responded that this was a constant

challenge for the Council but they used various communication methods to reach the public. It was added that young people could readily feedback their experiences on their placements through various methods, including a new council of users. However, in addition, there were a number of formal methods including talking to their placement officer and having a six monthly review of their placement.

RESOLVED: That

- i) The update be noted.**
- ii) The committee support the changing of the name of the supported lodgings service and that officers change the name to more accurately reflect the work the service undertakes.**

38. ADOPTION REPORT OUTLINING PROCESS AND PERFORMANCE

The adoption service had been separated from the fostering service for professional reasons. The team manager had left, which had impacted upon the team but the Council was using it as an opportunity to progress the service. The service functioned well but the Committee was reminded that due to the small number of young people it was working with, the performance figures could vary significantly if there were any delays in just one case.

The need to recruit adoption families was a constant challenge but the main challenges for the service were to reduce delays in the liaison between the adoption team and adoption panel, ensure there was sufficient administrative support to the service and review the payment system for adoption families. A team manager had been recruited and was due to start soon.

There was a discussion whereby it was clarified that people wanting to adopt their stepchildren had to go through the same process as others. They would also be invited to attend the same sessions as other adoption families. It was also clarified that if a council placed a child in adoptive care outside their area, they had a responsibility to support that child for three years after the placement.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

39. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee discussed the work programme and agreed to review the programme for the New Year in order to streamline and add value to the work being undertaken.

RESOLVED:

That a budget report be scheduled for January's meeting.

The meeting finished at 8.40pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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or alternatively e-mail mboulter@thurrock.gov.uk**