

MINUTES of the meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 17 December 2009 at 7.00pm.

Present: Councillors Anne Cheale (Chair), Diana Hale, Lynn Worrall and Charles Curtis (substituting for Marion Canavon)

Patricia Wilson.

Apologies: Councillors John Everett, Ian Harrison and Marion Canavon. Emma Woods and David Rollins.

In attendance: C. Stewart – Head of Business (Policy, Performance and Resources)
C. Tinkler – Head of School Improvement
J. Mercer – Head of 14-19 Provision
M. Lucas – 14-19 Partnership Development Manager
L Marks - Solicitor
M. Boulter- Principal Democratic Services Officer

40. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 12 and 19 November 2009, were approved as a correct record.

Councillor Hale asked whether the consultation on home to school transport fares had been drafted yet and it was responded that a draft had been completed, which did contain indicative fares that had yet to be finalised. The consultation programme was due to be presented to the Committee at its January meeting for comment.

41. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

Councillor Worrall declared a personal interest in relation to the work programme in that she works for the Prince's Trust, which may appear on the work programme.

Councillor Hale declared a personal interest by virtue that she is vice-chair of the Thurrock and Basildon Further Education Corporation.

Councillor Curtis declared a personal interest by virtue that he is a governor at the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), a governor of Ockendon School and the Chair of the Corporate Parenting Group.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

42. YOUTH AND CONNEXIONS – INFORMAL AND FORMAL YOUTH WORK PROVISION

The Committee was reminded that the youth service was integrated with the Connexions service and that the activities outlined in the report were for young people aged thirteen plus.

The Committee recognised that sixteen wards in Thurrock did not have any set youth activities but it was explained that services could not be provided in every ward and that the venues chosen for youth activities were accessible through easy transport links and many young people would access these activities at their local schools and youth centres. Officers added that they were working to improve service coverage across the borough via outreach activities, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. The council had been awarded funds from GO East to consult young people about what they would like to see provided at weekends.

It was clarified that the Council was focussing on those communities that would benefit most from targeted youth provision and it was also investigating other funding opportunities. The Committee was informed that there would never be enough funding for this aspect of youth work and that the council had to maximise the money it had available. With regards to the youth club at the Tilbury Academy, officers explained that funding for Saturday night activities could be used to invest in the youth club that had ceased there but it would have to be compared to other areas of Thurrock that also needed youth provision.

There was a short debate on the unavailability of public transport in some areas, which hampered young people accessing activities. Officers responded that there were two minibuses available to help any specific groups who were unable to access activities easily.

It was stressed that youth provision was most successful when the community supported it and helped it continue through volunteering. Thurrock was benefitting from increased volunteering at present. The youth service already had trainees in place and was looking into apprenticeships.

Councillor Curtis asked a question regarding sports courses at the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) and it was responded that the council had been working in partnership with a charity called NACRO to engage

with the young people. The programme had been very successful to date.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

43. UPDATE ON EARLY LEARNING AND THE ROLE OF EARLY EDUCATION PROVIDERS AND CHILDREN'S CENTRES

This report was requested by the Committee at its October meeting. It was outlined that all children were entitled to 12.5 hours per week of early education. 90% of three year olds met this criterion as did 97% of four year olds. There was a shortage of places in Chafford Hundred, South Stifford and Stifford Clays, which prevented more children accessing the education. However, work had been and was continuing to take place to increase places.

Children's Centres provided a valuable resource for parents to help them set boundaries with their children, work on their behaviours and generally get them ready to start school. This education was extremely valuable as a result. Children's centres were also important in reaching hard to reach parents. Alongside these centres, the council had established the Thurrock training and development centre, which supported staff in gaining qualifications relating to child development and improved the quality of the support provided to young children and their parents.

A short discussion was had on the importance of parental support for children's education and general prospects. Officers agreed to report back to the committee, outside its meetings, on whether research demonstrated that different styles of provision and the social environment in which children grew up had an impact on their prospects. It was noted that the funding for pre school children was due to change so that all settings and schools were funded for the number of children rather than on places as is currently the case for schools. The funding formula also placed a priority on qualified staff.

The Committee asked how the Council supported those parents that were very hard to reach and did not engage with the centres. It was responded that schools now provided study support time, which allowed children to stay at school after normal teaching hours to undertake further study. Schools also had parental support workers who helped parents engage with their child's education. The centres were also focussing on family learning to target the education of the parents, as well as their children. For the most difficult cases there were family intervention projects.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

44 UPDATE ON THE PROGRESS OF VULNERABLE GROUPS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

It was explained to the Committee that national data for the 2008/2009 year was not yet available so the Council could not compare its performance to other councils. In relation to the gap in performance for the early Years Foundation Stage between the most deprived areas of Thurrock and other areas in the borough, the gap had increased. This was an area in need of improvement.

In relation to key stage 2, performance measures showed that Thurrock was below average national performance. The highest achievers in key stage 2 were children of Asian background and those of Black African heritage. Officers highlighted that the looked after children category was difficult to measure because of the low numbers involved. However, all looked after children were supported to realise their potential and do the best they could. Four out of six children achieved level 4 in English, while two achieved similar results in Maths.

In key stage 4 the gap in performance between the poorest and richest areas in the borough increased and similar performance was noted for ethnic minorities. The performance of looked after children in their GCSEs also needed to significantly improve.

The Learning Campus and Learning Shop were important developments in Thurrock which would bring university presence into the area and would help raise aspirations for young people in education. Schools also needed to support the learning of all their pupils and this was improving in Thurrock with such initiatives as breakfast clubs. Focussing teachers' work in children's centres on transition between nursery and school was also being undertaken to improve performance.

RESOLVED: That

The update be noted.

45. BUILDING SCHOOLS FOR THE FUTURE (BSF)

The Committee were brought up to date with the BSF programme and the failure of the Council to secure funding in the last round of bidding. The Council had received detailed feedback on its original bid in July 2009 and had the opportunity to re-apply in September 2009 and January 2010. The Council had worked hard to improve its bid for the September submission date as it felt that there was a risk the economic climate could prevent the government from pursuing further BSF projects.

The government had not expected Thurrock to re-apply in September (but go for the January 2010 submission instead). In its response to the failed bid, the government outlined that Thurrock had been the most improved council and indications were good for the January submission. The Committee was reminded that new councils joined the bidding every round, so Thurrock was always facing stiff competition for the funding.

The key areas the council was working on to ensure success were:

- Detailing the deliverability of the BSF programme, namely outlining how the programme will impact on standards of education, as well as the communities and overall regeneration of the area.
- Focusing on leadership and change management in association with the programme.
- ICT infrastructure.
- Detailing how pupil places will be planned for over the next twenty five years.
- Detailing how the council will address the funding gap which is created by the way in which the government only fully funds half of all the school places.
- Being clear on the future of the Grays Arts Media College and deciding whether it was to be an academy or not.

The Committee noted that there was only a short period of time for the Council to improve further and asked what was planned to realise this. It was responded that clarity on the future of Grays Media Arts College would help and also, encouraging schools to join a performance programme. The bid also needed to provide more detail in terms of data, which the council was in a position to do.

The council had been informed that the BSF programme would continue in the future although to a lesser degree due to the economic climate.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

46. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee discussed the revised work programme and noted officers' comments about clarifying what detail the Committee wanted from reports each month. Members agreed to spend five minutes each meeting to clarify what they expected from next month's reports.

RESOLVED:

That the revised work programme be adopted.

The meeting finished at 8.52pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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