

## **MINUTES of the meeting of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10 December 2013 at 7:00pm**

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**Present:** Councillors, Charles Curtis (Chair), Steve Liddiard (substitute for Cathy Kent – arrived at 7:45pm), Tunde Ojetola, Andrew Roast, Sue Shinnick.

Rev D Barlow – Church of England Representative  
Mr A McPherson – Parent / Governor Representative  
Mrs P Wilson – Roman Catholic Church Representative

**Apologies:** Councillor Cathy Kent

**In attendance:** C. Littleton – Director of Children's Services  
B. Foster – Head of Care & Targeted Outcomes  
M. Peters – Strategic Lead, School Improvement, Learning and Skills  
S. Young – Senior Democratic Services Officer

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**The Chair informed those present that the meeting was being recorded and that the recording would be made available on the Council's website.**

The Chair welcomed Councillor Tunde Ojetola, who had been appointed as Vice-Chair of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee (replacing Councillor James Halden) and Councillor Andrew Roast (who had replaced Councillor Little as a member of the Committee) at the meeting of the Council held on 27 November 2013. It was also noted that Councillor Sue MacPherson had been appointed as a substitute member of the Committee, replacing Councillor Coxshall.

### **27. MINUTES**

The Minutes of extraordinary meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 30 October 2013, together with the Minutes of the meeting held on 5 November 2013, were approved as a correct record.

In relation to the minutes of the extraordinary meeting held on 30 October 2013, the Chair updated Members on the progress of co-opting a member of Youth Cabinet to sit on the Committee. Whilst giving the Youth Cabinet a meaningful voice and role on the Committee was something he was very keen on, and something that the Committee had discussed at length at both the July and October meetings, the Chair informed the Committee of a number of issues regarding their decision in October, which included:

- By agreeing to formally appoint a member of Youth Cabinet, the Committee had not given a chance for their decision in July to be implemented or evaluated.
- That there could be financial implications to the Members Allowances budget.
- Formal co-option would require the Youth Cabinet to nominate a single young person, who would be required to attend every Committee meeting. As it must be the same person each time, this was an inflexible arrangement that could create difficulties for the young person, who may find it problematic to attend every meeting due to exam and school commitments.

The Committee discussed the process of formal co-option and asked officers to clarify the recommendations that had been made previously during both the July and October Committee meetings. Officers explained that different and conflicting recommendations had been agreed at the July and the October meetings. A Member queried whether advice had been sought from the legal team, whether the Youth Cabinet had been consulted on a representative becoming a member of the Committee and whether the original proposal had been ratified by a Committee. Officers confirmed that:

- Advice had been sought from the Democratic Services Manager
- Councillor Halden had previously consulted the Youth Cabinet, who were keen to have a more meaningful role on the Committee.
- The previous recommendations of July and October had only been agreed by the Children's Services Overview Scrutiny Committee and had not been considered by either the Constitution Working Group or the Council.

Following some discussion the Committee agreed that the Youth Cabinet should be consulted (through the Youth Voice Champion) to seek their views on the best option for participation.

## **28. URGENT ITEMS**

The Chair informed the Committee that at the meeting in July, Councillor Halden had been appointed as the Youth Voice Champion, to act as the link with the Youth Cabinet. As Councillor Halden was no longer a member of the Committee, the Chair asked for nominations for the new Youth Voice Champion.

Councillor Roast put himself forward to be the Youth Voice Champion, which was seconded by Councillor Ojetola.

**RESOLVED:**

**That Councillor Roast be appointed as the new Youth Voice Champion.**

**29. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

a) Interests

Reverend Darren Barlow declared a non-pecuniary interest in the business of the meeting by virtue that he has children attending St Thomas Primary School, Grays Convent and Palmer's College and is a Governor and member of the trust at Palmer's College.

Councillor Ojetola declared a non-pecuniary interest in the business of the meeting by virtue that he is a Governor at Palmer's College.

Councillor Shinnick declared a non-pecuniary interest in the business of the meeting by virtue that she has a grandchild attending Belmont Castle Academy and a daughter that teaches at Gable Hall School.

Councillor Curtis declared a non-pecuniary interest in the business of the meeting by virtue that he has grandchildren attending Bulphan School and is a Governor at Ockendon School.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

**30. REPORT ON SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIPS**

Officers introduced the report which provided an update on the developing strategy for schools partnerships in Thurrock.

A Member questioned how a good Thurrock wide governance of school improvement (adopting an approach that was consistent with the Education Commission) was being achieved and specifically how the significant numbers of academies within the Borough were being engaged to ensure that governing bodies between academies and grant maintained schools were not becoming disconnected.

Officers noted that one of the elements of how this would be achieved was through the establishment of the Thurrock Education Alliance which would be a partnership of both academies (academy chains and free standing), local authority maintained schools, Elected Members

and other educational establishments in order to improve standards, share best practice and to drive up attainment. This was one of the key recommendations from the Education Commission report that was to be developed, and officers were keen to move quickly to bring this to fruition as a mechanism for good school governance and school improvement. It was further noted that there would be other elements that would fall underneath the Thurrock Education Alliance, which included the Thurrock Excellence Network that was intended to be a professional executive to consist of school representatives and teaching schools to drive school improvement work through support and training packages.

It was reported by officers that there was generally a popular misconception that schools became academies to stand alone and move away from other schools and the local authority; however from their experience in Thurrock this was not the case and academies were both very keen to help other schools (both primary and secondary of all types) and the community at large – this was reflected in the fact that the four Thurrock Teaching Schools were all academies.

A Member commended the work of the officers and the Committee in relation to the Education Commission and welcomed the seemingly sensible approach for bringing schools together to raise standards; however they were concerned that it would add another layer of bureaucracy to schools and academies and also questioned how the local authority linked in with governors to ensure they had the necessary training required. It was confirmed that there was a link officer dedicated to leading on the governance function and school governors were offered school specific training to enable them to effectively provide challenge – it was reported that training courses were well received and that this approach was working well. The Committee were informed that in order to address further areas of development within schools that 'required improvement', Progress Boards had been set up which supported governors on how to provide effective challenge and increase standards within the governing body. It was further reported that the Thurrock Education Alliance served to reduce bureaucracy by allowing the school to go in directly and work with other schools.

A Member sought assurances that the Thurrock Education Alliance would be a meaningful body and would not become simply another bureaucratic Committee for a school representative to attend, as it was referenced that other Committees – in particular the Thurrock Admissions Forum and the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) faced challenges in terms of poor attendance.

Officers assured the Committee that the Thurrock Education Alliance and the Excellence Network were school led and simply a mechanism to get support into the right school at the right time. In relation to Thurrock Admissions Forum, officers recognised that although not a

statutory body it had been decided to keep the forum as key issues were discussed there, however it was suggested that this be kept under review and that possibly at some point in the future the items for the Admissions Forum could be instead be brought for review to the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee as a way of still addressing the issues but ensuring the meetings were quorate.

A Member questioned whether there was scope for community groups to work with schools on developing projects with children and teaching staff, to which officers confirmed that there were exciting opportunities for schools to engage with community groups to expand upon their core business of teaching; the importance of this had been highlighted in the Education Commission report and was also part of the work being developed with the Education Aspiration Strategy which included an element of raising the cultural entitlement for every child through schools working with cultural industries.

**RESOLVED:**

**That, in light of the views expressed at the meeting, the suggested features and direction for schools partnership for education improvement in Thurrock, following the published findings of the Thurrock Education Commission, be noted.**

**31. RAISING OF THE PARTICIPATION AGE (RPA)**

Officers introduced the report, which provided an update on the delivery plan on Raising the Participation Age (RPA). It was reported that new legislation specified that from the start of the 2013/14 academic year all 16-17 year olds were required to continue in some form of education or training until the end of the academic year in which they turned 17 and that from 2015, the age limit would be increased to 18.

Members sought clarification in respect of the most recent comparative figures for both the East of England and National levels of performance. It was confirmed that the figure quoted in the report under paragraph 2.13 should have read for September 2013 this had increased to 98%, 99.8% for Year 11 students and had decreased to 94.8% for Year 12 students.

Members questioned why Thurrock was performing stronger than East of England, Southend and Essex in relation to youth participation when education achievement in Thurrock was generally weaker in comparison.

In response officers emphasised a number of factors contributed to the good results, which included:

- There was a good partnership approach in Thurrock with local schools, colleges and businesses working together.
- There had been change in policy decision that offered the chairing of the Community Learning and Skills board to a strong head, which had resulted in a strong ownership locally.
- The Council had a good team of officers who directly contacted the number of 'unknown' young people in Thurrock and confirmed their position – taking action when necessary – and thereby reduced Thurrock's Not in Education, Employment of Training (NEET) figure.
- Local colleges and other providers worked together to make good offers to young people which were taken up.

The Committee were informed that direct representations were made to business associations through the 11-19 Strategic Group and the Economic Development and Skills Group, who worked with businesses, such as the Port of Tilbury Authority, to ensure that secondary schools were developing the skills of young people to enable them to progress a career in the local business economy.

Members requested further detail about the Big Lottery funding that had been secured. The Committee were informed that whilst a bid for funding had been made, the outcome of this was awaited. Officers confirmed that they would provide an update for Members as and when further information became available and that this was expected to be in January/February 2014.

Members commended the work of the service area and acknowledged that they had seen firsthand that young people were being prepared with the skills to secure local jobs. In addition, the work of Thurrock businesses was also praised and it was recognised that local companies such as DP World provided good apprenticeship opportunities for young people.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the Committee note the progress on delivering the duty relating to Raising the Participation Age (RPA).**

**32. LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS**

Officers introduced the report, which provided members with an overview of the service for looked after children and care leavers, together with the statutory and legislative changes that impacted upon the service.

It was noted that following the publication of the report, there had been a significant national announcement from Central Government which stated that Looked After Children were to remain in foster care up until

the age of 21 years, or possibly 25. However, Members were advised that the financial implications had yet to be fully understood.

The Committee were informed that there had been a large increase in the number of Looked After Children in recent years, from 210 children in 2010 to 285 plus children in 2012 and that this was in line with the national trend. It was further reported that the government had encouraged the use of adoption through the Looked After Children care system but that the courts had been somewhat at odds as to how to respond to this and were still mindful of the Human Rights Act and the right of children to be maintained in their own family.

It was further reported that increased numbers of Looked After Children increased the cost to the service but that officers continually sought to increase the number of in house foster carers, as it was much more economical for the local authority to manage their own foster homes rather than paying for private provision. Members were advised that it was estimated that the cost to the local authority was between £14,000 - £27,000 per annum to manage in house foster provision, versus the £36,000 - £59,000 per annum cost of provision in the private sector.

Officers advised that they were keen to work with Members to investigate new ways to support in-house foster carers. It was suggested that leisure and shopping discounts or a Council Tax break for foster carers could be investigated as some other local authorities had agreed that foster carers paid nil council tax in recognition for their services to the wider community. Members were keen to investigate this further.

Officers suggested that Thurrock appeared to have more Looked After Children than its statistical neighbours, and a Member asked for further detailed statistical analysis to be circulated to evidence this, particularly in comparison to Essex and Southend. Officers stated that this information could be circulated to the Committee, however Thurrock's statistical neighbours were not Councils that were the nearest in distance terms, rather they were pre-determined by Central Government as places that Thurrock had most in common and included some Shire Counties and some Local Authorities in the North.

A Member recognised that Looked After Children was a sensitive and emotive issue and commended the work of the service. However, concern was expressed about the cost implications of supporting the children's placements budget. The Member noted the fact that there had been an additional £3 million adjustment in the Children's Services placement budget in order to address the financial shortfall, and was concerned that this could continue to increase in the future and become difficult for the local authority to afford.

Officers were requested to outline any predicted financial projections for the 2014/15 budget and, in doing so, advised that:

- The Children's Services directorate was working hard to decrease the number of children that required to be taken into care by providing as many preventative services as possible, such as the Early Offer of Help Initiative, which aimed to prevent the escalation of problems and ultimately avoid children entering the foster care system (and therefore requiring the use of expensive protective strategies later on) by ensuring they that could be safely maintained within their own family unit.
- It was the statutory duty of the local authority to protect children and young people, and if a child must be taken into care a decision would be made to do so without regard to financial implications, as ultimately the wellbeing of that child was of the utmost importance.
- When a child was taken into care, officers attempted to secure placements that were economically efficient as possible – for example, through using the local authority's in house foster carers over private provision – however the needs of the children varied which meant that some children needed to be placed in more expensive private provision due to therapeutic or behavioural needs they required support for.
- It was misleading to determine that there had been a growth of £3 million in the children's placement budget, because in real terms this was a budget adjustment. It was reported that during the previous financial year the service had overspent by approximately £2.5 million because of the increased numbers of children entering the system.
- It was difficult to predict the projected budget for the next financial year as this was dependent on a number of external uncontrollable factors. These included determining how many children would be brought into care during the forthcoming year, which was impossible to predict.
- The Children's Services directorate made in-year savings every year and that the challenge of increased numbers of Looked After Children (and therefore increased pressure on finances) was a matter not unique to Thurrock and was in fact a national issue.
- That there had been a rise in families moving into the Thurrock due to the recent welfare reforms.

In response to Members' questions regarding the financial implications of the new legislation of maintaining foster children in care up until the age of 21, it was reported that it was too early to evaluate these because Central Government funding had not been confirmed. It was noted that, although there were early reports of an extra £40 million funding for the entire country, this could equate to a very small amount in local terms.

Members welcomed the fact that the weekly fostering allowances had been increased for local authority foster carers, and questioned the



percentage of children who were looked after by in house carers over private provision. It was explained that there was an approximate split of 52% private provision to 48% in house provision.

A Member was concerned that it took a long time to be able to become an approved foster carer for the local authority. The Committee were informed that a fine balance needed to be achieved when recruiting foster carers to ensure they were adequately prepared for the responsibility and it was thought that the national required standard of 6 months was an appropriate length of time to complete the process. Members were informed that this had been ratified during the last Ofsted inspection where the service had achieved a 'good' rating.

Members questioned why the ratio of foster carer enquiries to approval was so low in Thurrock, to which officers stated that it was important to help individuals reach an appropriate decision for both them and their family, but often the magnitude of the responsibility was a factor in pulling out for the process. It was noted that this was a national problem in recruiting foster carers and that Thurrock had the additional challenge of competing for foster carers with nearby London Boroughs and the private sector both of which actively recruited in the Borough.

A Member asked for further explanation on the numbers categorised as in 'unsuitable accommodation', following which the Committee were informed that social workers used government guidelines and self reported what accommodation was deemed 'suitable' and 'unsuitable' for care leavers during the year of their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was further reported that the after care team were often their own worst critics and maintained very high standards; examples of unsuitable accommodation were provided as living with inappropriate companions, or sofa surfing with friends.

#### **RESOLVED:**

**That the Committee note the content of the report, and that Officers take into account the views of Members expressed at the meeting in relation to further support to the council's fostering service.**

### **33. PROPOSALS FOR SPENDING ON NEETS (NOT IN EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION OR TRAINING) AND EDUCATION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS**

Officers introduced the report, which provided an update on the growth agreed for Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) and School Improvement.

Members were particularly concerned that Thurrock was investing money to train teachers, who once becoming qualified were leaving in order to secure better paid jobs in nearby London Boroughs where

teaching roles were subject to London Weighting payments. Officers agreed that this had been a concern and that they were committed to retaining teachers in Thurrock. It was reported that there was currently a new approach to teacher training, which could be achieved through either the traditional degree route or teach direct, whereby teachers were trained on the job. The Committee were advised that through the Teach Direct route, trainee teachers were required to commit to staying at their school (or a partner school) for a minimum of two years, which was an excellent way forward for the schools.

Members were informed that Thurrock was an excellent place to come and teach, and that Thurrock schools appealed to teachers from both around the country and the world who were attracted to the mixed rural urban lifestyle and lower house prices than London. It was noted that in the past year one local school had recruited an experienced teacher from Canada.

The Committee agreed that the Education Commission Report and recommendations were excellent.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the Committee note the content of the report.**

**34. WORK PROGRAMME**

It was noted that a Funding Update on the Education Commission and Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) spending report should come back to the Committee on 18 March 2014.

Officers advised that the report of the next Social Care in Excellence (SCIE) review would be delayed due to the fact that it was not expected to go to the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) until January 2014. It was reported that this could be presented to the Committee in March 2014.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the Committee:**

**Note and agree the work programme subject to the following amendments:**

- **The inclusion of the funding update on the Education Commission and NEET report to come to the Committee on 18 March 2014.**
- **That the report of the next SCIE review be moved from the 28 January to the 18 March 2014 meeting.**

The meeting finished at 8.55pm

Approved as a true and correct record.

**CHAIR**

**DATE**

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact  
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