

MINUTES of the meeting of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 28 January 2014 at 7:00pm

Present: Councillors Charles Curtis (Chair), Cathy Kent, 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

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
J. Clark – Strategic Lead Operations, Resources and Libraries Unit
A. Cotgrove – Business Manager
N. Laurie – Safeguarding and Child Protection Coordinator & LADO
D. Peplow – Independent Chair of Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB)
F. Akindele – Youth Cabinet Representative
M. Vinall – Principal of Palmer's College
D. Griffiths – Assistant Principal of Palmer's College
S. Young – Senior Democratic Services Officer

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 a member of Youth Cabinet, who had been invited to sit on the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee following discussions held at the meeting on the 10 December 2013. The Chair explained how he and the appointed Youth Link Champion had consulted with Youth Cabinet and sought their views on the best options for youth participation going forward. It was agreed by Youth Cabinet that a Youth Cabinet Member would be invited to attend Children's Overview and Scrutiny where relevant items were to be discussed and the individual would be selected on a rota basis. This option provided an equal opportunity for involvement of all interested parties of Youth Cabinet. The Chair explained that Youth Cabinet had requested that two members of Youth Cabinet be permitted to attend Children's Overview and Scrutiny meetings as demand to be involved and contribute was so high. The Committee agreed that this would be permitted in future.

35. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10 December 2013 were approved as a correct record.

36. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

37. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

Councillor Kent declared a non-pecuniary interest in the business of the meeting by virtue that she has children attending St Thomas Primary School, Hathaway Academy, and Palmer's Sixth Form College. She is a Parent Governor at Grays Convent School.

Councillor Roast declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to items 8 and 9 by virtue that he is the owner and director of a children's centre and thereby is involved in early year's education and safeguarding children.

Reverend Darren Barlow declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to item 5 of the meeting by virtue that he is a Governor and trustee at Palmer's College and that he has children attending St Thomas Primary School, Grays Convent and Palmer's College.

Councillor Ojetola declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to item 5 by virtue that he is a Governor at Palmer's College. In relation to the general business of the meeting a further non-pecuniary interest was declared in as he had children attending the Gateway Academy and Belmont Castle Academy.

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 the Ockendon Academy.

Councillor Shinnick declared a non-pecuniary interest in the business of the meeting by virtue that she has a grandchild attending Belmont Castle Academy.

Mrs P Wilson declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue that she is a member of the Diocese of Brentwood Education Commission.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

38. PALMER'S COLLEGE OFSTED ACTION PLAN

Officers introduced the report which provided an update on the 2013 Autumn Term Ofsted inspection of Palmer's College. Officers reported that Palmer's College was an important educational establishment within Thurrock and was responsible for a rapid improvement in A-Level pass rates. It was further reported that 2012 saw the best pass rates achieved. At a recent Ofsted inspection the college was deemed as 'requiring improvement' and officers thought that this decision was compounded by the fact that Ofsted had recently raised the bar in relation to inspection criteria.

The Principal and Assistant Principal of Palmer's College were welcomed by the Committee, who had been invited at the Chair's request. The Principal explained the college's improvement plan and the ambition to improve back to their previous standing, it was hoped that at the next inspection the college could achieve a 'good' rating and that 'outstanding' could be obtained thereafter. It was anticipated that the college would be re-inspected in 12-18 months time. The Principal recognised that the context of Palmer's College had changed significantly over the past 6 or 7 years in terms of its social and economic demography and the introduction of new sixth form provision in the borough.

The Assistant Principal was the dedicated senior post holder to improve the quality of teaching and assessments and Palmer's were confident that at the next inspection they could make significant improvements. He reported that Ofsted had been positive about the College self-assessment and that it was deemed to be a very accurate and self-critical report, with the key areas for improvement identified. The Committee learnt that with the changing profile of students the college had been required to adapt its teaching and learning to meet the needs of individual students. Palmer's College were continuing to improve the professional development of its staff, and it was hoped that this would have an impact on improving the results going forward.

Members asked for further clarification on the difference between success and pass rates and the importance of students to achieve good grades. The Principal explained that when measuring the college's success, it was important to evaluate the value added score and they focussed on clearly determining success rates rather than pass rates. It was clarified that the success rate was the percentage of students starting and successfully completing a subject. The Principal explained that success rate data was more accurate as this measured all those individuals entering the college system, achieving good

grades and leaving once qualifications were obtained. Palmer's College had the ambition to achieve the highest success rates possible. The importance of students being supported to achieve the best grades possible, with good or better progress than their starting point of when they entered the college was reiterated.

Members questioned whether all schools, colleges or academies who received challenging Ofsted reports in the future would be submitting reports to Overview and Scrutiny for discussion, as it was thought this approach was advantageous. Officers felt that it was important that Palmer's College attended scrutiny as they were a significant educational establishment with over 2000 students in Thurrock, but this was something for the Committee to decide and include on the work programme in future. Officers reiterated that Palmer's attendance was important to allow Members to delve deeper beyond the press headlines. The Principal of Palmer's College noted the importance of partnership working with the Local Authority and Elected Members, even though the college was not directly accountable to the Council.

Members asked the Assistant Principal of Palmer's College if Ofsted had not raised the bar how confident would they have been of achieving a 'good' or 'satisfactory' rating. In response it was explained that under the old framework it would have been likely that the college would have achieved a 'satisfactory' rating but there would have been no significant difference. Officers differed in view, and explained that inspection framework focussed much more on quality and level of teaching than they had done previously.

The Principal noted that the college was committed to social inclusion and had an open admissions policy. This ensured that the College curriculum was appropriate for its intake, providing support, challenge and stretch to maximise the success rate.

A Member asked for clarification on the proportion of first year students who were from outside Thurrock, to which it was explained that approximately 17%-18% of students did not reside in the Borough. Future potential challenges were outlined, in that if with more students decided to continue their studies at school, the college may not reach its 2,100 capacity and that would impact on funding. It was explained that it was beneficial for students to attend an independent and larger sixth form college, which could often offer a wider breadth of courses than individual schools or academies.

The Committee agreed that it was important to support Palmer's College and were thankful of the opportunity to scrutinise the action plan. It was felt that similar exercises would be of benefit in future and that ultimately the work undertaken would improve performance and management arrangements for teaching and learning and for governance challenge.

The Principal noted that he had a copy of a letter that provided an update since the publication of the agenda on the two meetings of HMI (Her Majesty's Inspector's) that had taken place in the interim which indicated that improvements and progress had been made. The Committee welcomed this update and requested an addition to the resolution to note this progress.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee:

- 1. Note the actions and support for Palmer's College.**
- 2. Recognise the progress that has been made by Palmer's College so far.**

39. PUPIL PLACE PLAN (2014-2018)

Officers introduced the report, which presented the Pupil Place Plan (2014-2018) and highlighted the areas where demand for school places was projected to exceed the number of places that were available.

Members welcomed the report and expressed the opinion that it was good to investigate this area further and delve deeper into the problem of school places that was widely reported in the press. It was apparent to a Member that Thurrock appeared to have a higher fertility rate than its statistical neighbours and the UK and that this had an effect on the corresponding number of school places available.

A Member was particularly concerned about the shortfall of places within the Grays / West Thurrock area and hoped that this issue would be resolved by the new Harris Academy free school that was planned for the Chafford Hundred and West Thurrock area which would also intake pupils from the Purfleet catchment area.

Members were concerned about secondary school provision and the shortfall that would arise in future when the increased numbers of primary school children were expected to enter secondary education. Officers assured the Committee that the Pupil Place Plan was updated on an annual basis; this ensured that the Local Authority has sufficient time to respond. At the time of the meeting, there was not shortfall in secondary school places within the local authority.

A Member welcomed this work but expressed concern regarding the lack of public perception about pupil place planning, and reported that apprehensive parents were not aware of the work that was undertaken.

In relation to this a Member further questioned what was being done to incorporate parental choice in pupil place planning to ensure that there was adequate provision to allow for parental choice. He also asked for

clarification on how the admissions process was managed to ensure that schools not as popular were not left behind.

Officers confirmed that the service worked with all schools within the planning area that was expected to experience a shortfall of places. It was assured that Ofsted ratings of schools were examined and that these were taken into account in the decision making process as to which schools could be expanded under the Capital Projects Programme. The authority always looked to increase spaces in good or outstanding schools to ensure that pupil places would meet demand and allow for parental choice.

Members of the Committee asked officers to exercise sensitivity when responding to enquiries from apprehensive parents during the admissions process, and that offering good customer service was vital during this stressful time.

A Member asked for clarification on the following 3 points:

- The timescales for ensuring that all aspects of programme were in place to guarantee that there were sufficient school places.
- When looking to expand 'good' or 'outstanding' schools what work was being done with residents living near those schools that could experience increased traffic and parking problems.
- What was being done to ensure adequate nursery and pre-school provision in the Chafford Hundred area.

In response officers stated that the service planned five years in advance, which was sufficient time to inform and shape the Capital Projects Programme regarding building and expanding schools.

When examining whether a school was appropriate for expansion, officers were mindful of the issues that this potentially created for residents and worked alongside colleagues in Highways and the School's own travel plan to look at additional parking and traffic calming measures.

The plans for a new Harris free school that were being developed for the Chafford Hundred area included a 52 place nursery which was expected to alleviate pressure on early years places.

A Member expressed concern about the new Chafford Hundred free school and felt that as a five form entry school it may not be as a popular choice with parents that officers hoped, who may not want to send young children to a school which accommodated older children and young people. It was also noted that if the school's reputation declined this could cause problems in the fact that additional demand would be placed on other nearby schools.

Officers reported that five form entry schools were becoming ever more popular and a necessary option in order to meet demand. Five form entry schools elsewhere had proved a popular choice, and Members were assured that in the construction of the school site it was likely that there would be separate infants, juniors and secondary blocks. In effect there would be smaller 'schools' or school blocks located on the same grounds to make up one larger school complex.

Members asked officers how planning applications for large housing developments were taken into account during the pupil place forecasting process. An example was provided of a planning application which had been submitted but had not yet been heard at planning committee for a large 700 home development in the Corringham area. Officers confirmed that both outline planning applications and forecast were included in the pupil place planning strategy in addition to the number of live births. When planning applications were approved for development these were then included in the following year's statistics which were reviewed on an annual basis. This ensured that the pupil place planning data was as accurate as possible.

The Committee acknowledged the challenging work of the team in predicting the number of school places that were required and requested that this item comes back to Overview and Scrutiny every year.

RESOLVED:

That the committee note and agree the pupil place plan.

40. EDUCATION COMMISSION

Officers introduced the report, which provided members with an update on the work of the Thurrock Education Commission and the progress on the recommendations.

Members welcomed the fact that all sections of the local authority education team were coming together to work in the best interests of local children.

A Member asked for clarification as to what was being done to recruit and retain teachers in the Borough. It was assured that the local authority and schools had a joint and proactive approach to recruit and retain Newly Qualified teachers. In addition, home grown teachers were recruited through the Schools Direct scheme, following which teachers were committed to the school where they trained for a period of one to two years. Officers felt that retention was only one factor and that it was important to create opportunities for professional development in order for teachers to progress into leadership positions and that more could be done to promote Thurrock as a place to live and work.

It was reported that recruitment was more of a challenge to schools than retention. Officers felt that Thurrock was relatively unknown as a location to work and that more should be done to increase Thurrock's profile and the benefits that Thurrock offered to prospective teachers. Officers stated that there was nothing that Thurrock could legally do to bind teachers into staying in the Borough to teach however the importance of a good governing body was highlighted, as governors were expected to recognise the work of their good teachers and be assertive and proactive in valuing their staff and offering training and professional development.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the progress made on developing the action plan.

41. SAFEGUARDING AND CHILD PROTECTION

Officers introduced the report, which considered the Council's duties to safeguard children and lead on Child Protection. There had been a 26% rise in the number of referrals of child protection investigations. It was reported that the net increase of referrals and investigations was in line with national statistics but was a pressure on the service.

It was reported that the Early Offer of Help programme expected to be launched in April 2014 would reduce the number of child protection cases escalating through the service.

An update on the Troubled Families initiative was provided which was a payment by results service. It was reported that central government had made payment for 38 families who had been supported by the programme, and that a further 30-40 families were being submitted. The government payment criteria were strict and it was emphasised that many more families had been successfully supported through the programme than the authority had received payment.

Officers reported the significant impact the Welfare Reform Bill had on the service, which had witnessed an increase in the migration of families in need of services arriving from nearby London Boroughs.

Members noted the reported increase in the numbers of child protection cases which included concerns regarding violence against girls and online and sexual exploitation. It was questioned how the authority tackled this.

In response officers outlined the Essex wide strategy of Child Sexual Exploitation which was police led. It was noted that Essex police managed a central intelligence base and this information was fed to the local authority, schools, health visitors, hospitals and partner agencies.

Officers stated that safeguarding children was the responsibility of everyone and that they were keen to raise the awareness of this in the local community, but that each agency had a 'champion' who received additional training in order to specifically assist with these issues. It was reported that the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) had purchased an additional 1600 licences which enabled them to provide an online training facility.

It was further reported that a local strategy group had been established where local partner agencies worked alongside colleagues in Education. An example was provided where the Ockendon Academy had been working with a group of young people, which discussed and reviewed child protection issues from a young person's perspective. It was noted that this work was with children as young as years 5,6 and 7 students and that they hoped to hold a 2 week programme in conjunction with Essex Police in order to raise awareness of online concerns.

The Committee welcomed the report and were keen to assist officers wherever possible in order to identify a constructive way forward.

Members noted that there had been Ofsted inspection in 2012 and asked whether there were any plans to deliver another. Officers confirmed that a regular audit was undertaken which ensured that the service was satisfied with the people who were on child protection plans. It was reported that the mock inspection examined the thresholds and were satisfied with those that were subject to child protection plans were correct and accurate. This had been ratified by the last Ofsted inspection, although it was noted that Thurrock had always generally higher statistics on those who were on child protection plans than their statistical neighbours.

A Member asked how the service worked with harder to reach families to which officers responded that partnership working was essential. Officers worked alongside a range of agencies which included local organisations such as TRUST, Basildon University Hospital Trust and Essex Police – which is where the largest volume of referrals was made from. Officers felt that partnership working would lead to improved outcomes with the anticipated launch of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) in Spring 2014.

Officers believed that the high numbers of referrals and child protection plans indicated that Thurrock was working well to ensure that vulnerable people were protected and that this was testament to the relationships and systems that the local authority had in place with the Essex Police and partners.

A Member asked for an update on the staff numbers in the team to which it was confirmed the number of staff had stayed the same since January 2013.

Officers reported that the diverse team of safeguarding staff added value to the service, as officers were often multi-lingual which enabled them help those people who may of otherwise experienced problems accessing the service.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee:

- 1. Note the contents of the report.**
- 2. Continue to monitor this service area.**

42. THURROCK LOCAL SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD (LSCB) ANNUAL REPORT 2012-13

The Independent Chair of Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) introduced the report which provided an overview of the annual performance of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board during 2012/13. An update was provided on the audits which had been undertaken and recruitment. It was acknowledged that the report had been late coming to the Overview and Scrutiny committee due to resourcing issues; however it was anticipated that the updated annual report for 2013-14 could be included on the work programme in the new municipal year in June / July 2014.

Members questioned how the LSCB worked with harder to reach vulnerable people. The Independent Chair confirmed that they worked hard to raise their profile in the local community and specifically aimed to work closely with faith groups and those small community groups who worked with children. This ensured that community groups had good working practices and knowledge of safeguarding issues whilst also being protected.

A Member asked whether the LSCB was working with Thurrock Faith Matters. It was reported that the LSCB had planned a drop in style conference event for Safeguarding leads and that 104 Faith Groups were to be contacted and invited to the event. This was the first stage on the journey to liaise with faith organisations. A Member asked whether a list of the faith group contact details could be shared with him in order to cross-check that those organisations he worked alongside were included and it was agreed that this would be circulated.

A Member asked whether the LSCB had sufficient funding and if they had more funds what they hoped to achieve. The Independent Chair

felt that they had sufficient funding and that they had worked very well with the limited funds that were available. It was noted that if more funds were available the LSCB would hope to conduct additional serious case reviews. Officers acknowledged the good work of the board, but anticipated that they would experience an additional pressure on resources and workload when preparing for the Ofsted inspection.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the progress made on Children's Safeguarding for the 12 month period from April 2012 to March 2013.

43. WORK PROGRAMME

It was noted that nine items were remaining on the work programme but only one further meeting of Children's Overview and Scrutiny was scheduled for this municipal year. It was acknowledged that some reports would need to be carried over to the next municipal year or further updates circulated by briefing notes in order to keep the number of reports for March to a manageable number.

Officers outlined that the report of the next Social Care Institute for Excellence review (SCIE) scheduled for March 2014 would not be ready and this was to be kept on the work programme for the next municipal year.

The Committee agreed that officers could supply a briefing note on the following items so that an update could be received before the Council entered purdah.

- Final School Budget
- Funding update on Education Commission and NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) spending.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee:

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

- **The report of the next Social Care in Excellence (SCIE) review return to the Committee in the new municipal year.**
- **A briefing note be circulated to the Committee prior to the March 2014 meeting on the final schools budget and a separate update on Education Commission and NEET spending.**

The meeting finished at 9.25pm.

Approved as a true and correct record.

CHAIR

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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