

## **Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10 March 2015 at 7.00 pm**

---

**Present:** Councillors Val Morris-Cook (Chair), James Halden (Vice-Chair), Charles Curtis, Martin Kerin, Tunde Ojetola and Graham Snell

Reverend Darren Barlow, Church of England Representative

**Apologies:** S. Ali – Youth Cabinet Representative  
J. Henderson – Youth Cabinet Representative

**In attendance:**

Carmel Littleton, Director of Children's Services  
Andrew Carter, Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes  
Janet Clark, Strategic Lead Operational, Resources and Libraries Unit  
Temi Fawehinmi, Contract and Performance Manager  
Michele Lucas, Learning & Skills Manager  
Malcolm Taylor, Strategic Lead - Learner Support  
Stephanie Cox, Senior Democratic Services Officer

---

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.

### **32. Minutes**

Councillor Ojetola advised that he was not in attendance at the last meeting held on 10 February 2015, which was not reflected in the minutes. He also asked when an item on Admissions would be referred to the Committee, to which the Director of Children's Services advised that a briefing note would be circulated following Members agreement at the previous meeting.

Councillor Halden felt that the minutes were accurate but requested that action points arising from meetings should be progressed faster. He observed that the protocol that was agreed at the last meeting to be referred to the Corporate Parenting Committee had not been actioned and that the Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care had not yet made a statement to full Council which had been requested at the last meeting.

The Director of Children's Services proposed that it would be more appropriate to refer the protocol for informing Members of serious issues in future to the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee rather than the Corporate Parenting Committee, to which Members agreed to the amendment.

The Minutes of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 10 February 2015, were approved as a correct record.

### **33. Items of Urgent Business**

There were no urgent items of business.

### **34. Declaration of Interests**

Councillor Kerin declared a non-pecuniary interest in respect of Agenda Item 8, Pupil Place Plan 2014-2015, as his wife was an employee of the Harris Academy Chafford Hundred.

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

Councillor Ojetola declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to the general business of the meeting as he had children attending the Gateway Academy, Belmont Castle Academy and was a Governor at Palmer's College and Gateway Academy. He also declared a further non-pecuniary interest in respect of Agenda Item 8, Pupil Place Plan 2014-2015, as he was one of the parents who had applied for a school place at the Harris Free School, Chafford Hundred.

Reverend Barlow declared a non-pecuniary interest in the general business of the meeting as he had children attending St Thomas Primary School, Grays Convent and Palmer's College. He was also a trustee and corporation member at Palmer's College and his wife was employed at St Thomas Primary School.

### **35. Multi-Agency Action Plan - Serious Case Review**

The Head of Children's Social Care introduced the report and action plan, included in appendix 1, which detailed the progress that had been made in Children's Social Care and Education in response to the findings of the Serious Case Review.

Councillor Halden observed that all items detailed on the action plan were of a 'green' status, and was worried about this given the severity of the issues that had been presented.

The Head of Children's Social Care explained that the 'green' status meant that progress was on track and that no additional action was required but that did not mean that all actions had been completed as development would be ongoing.

Councillor Ojetola observed that he was happy the actions were on track and affirmed that as long as regular updates were provided to the Committee he was happy for the process to continue.

The Director of Children's Services informed the Committee that the team had been progressing ahead at pace in order to achieve the green indicators and that regular updates were provided to the Management Team every fortnight in order to ensure work was on target.

Councillor Morris-Cook remarked that initially she was concerned that the outcomes did not follow SMART methodology and were not easily measurable, however on further inspections she welcomed the 'RAG' status, evidence and target dates so that progress could be validated.

Councillor Halden questioned the Head of Children's Social Care and received responses as follows:

- In relation to the matter as to whether the board were aware that Children in Need processes were vulnerable to pressures on Social Work teams, Councillor Halden observed that he had raised this concern at the previous meeting and was assured that workload pressures or time constraints had not attributed to this case being flagged up.
- The Head of Children's Social Care explained that the issue had not been progressed further primarily due to the fact that there had been a preoccupation with identifying the case as a rape case, and therefore a criminal matter, rather than one of Child Sexual Exploitation.
- Councillor Halden was concerned that the introduction of the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) had increased the number of the agencies involved, in light of the fact that one of the failings which had been identified was that agencies felt that their duty was complete because they had shared information rather than taking responsibility for their own actions in the safeguarding arena. He questioned how this had been addressed.

The Head of Children's Social Care advised that cases were referred into the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and escalated as necessary, where all agencies were challenged. This was reinforced by the fact that each agency was represented in the MASH.

The Director of Children's Services informed Members that a monthly audit of case files took place, where a sample of case files were audited by line managers and social workers questioned to establish what relationships were like and identify if escalation was required.

**RESOLVED:**

**That Members be invited to scrutinise the Multi-Agency Action Plan and the feedback be noted.**

### **36. Child Sexual Exploitation Update**

The Head of Children's Social Care introduced the report which provided an update on the Children's Social Care Child Sexual Exploitation Action Plan and on actions in response to the Ofsted Thematic Inspection – 'The Sexual Exploitation of Children: it couldn't happen here, could it?'. In introducing the report he explained that 'Stranger Danger' had recently been provided in addition to Child Sexual Exploitation Champion training.

Councillor Kerin asked whether a dedicated Senior Social Worker had been recruited yet, to which the Head of Children's Social Care advised that he hoped someone would be in post by the end of the month.

Councillor Ojetola asked for clarification as to how 'missing' was defined. In response officers explained that unauthorised absences did not constitute as missing, however any regular patterns of unauthorised absence of missing education were fed into the Child Sexual Exploitation Panel.

Councillor Halden raised concerns that that the Serious Case Review had highlighted that the case was closed prematurely, Social Workers wrongly believed that the young person could not be seen without her mother, and certain procedures were not followed. He questioned whether there was a problem with training individuals or if further professional development was required.

In response the Head of Children's Social Care highlighted that the Ofsted thematic review was not Thurrock specific but assured Members that medium and high risk cases were discussed regularly at strategy meetings to ensure that all concerned were satisfied the level of risk was being addressed.

Councillor Halden expressed his confidence in the senior management team in satisfactorily addressing and identifying the level of risk, but was concerned how this was being put into practice by staff at all levels on a 24/7 basis. The Head of Children's Social Care explained that Thurrock was working with both Essex County Council and Southend-on-Sea Borough Council to undertake a review of cases from the past 5 years, and further advised that a specialist Child Sexual Exploitation Coordinator would shortly be appointed and a programme of Child Sexual Exploitation Champion training was underway.

Rev Barlow questioned whether all recommendations from the Ofsted thematic inspection had been adopted by Thurrock, to which it was confirmed that the recommendations had been adopted and were having the required impact. The Head of Children's Social Care explained that a further report could be brought back to the Committee in the new municipal year to update Members as to the progress.

The Committee were advised that a sample of cases were regularly identified through the casework system so that managers could monitor that all appropriate actions were on track, which would be an ongoing process

through the work of the Coordinator. Members were advised that if any action was overdue it would show as a red.

Councillor Curtis asked whether schools in Thurrock were engaged with the Child Sexual Exploitation process, to which it was explained that officers were not complacent and were engaging with all schools. It was reported that every school was represented at the last Sexual Exploitation training session and that schools were working well with the local authority.

Councillor Morris-Cook asked how Child Sexual Exploitation comfortable the service was that children and young people educated at home were not at risk and questioned how issues could be reported in these circumstances. The Director of Children's Services explained that this was a difficult area as by law the Local Authority had no specific right to be made aware of children educated at home because parents did not have to register as home educators; however a visit by an officer of the Council was offered to all home educators. It was reported that the offer of visits were often taken up and these visits could identify any potential issues.

The Head of Children's Social Care further advised that potential Child Sexual Exploitation cases could be identified in many other ways outside of the school setting, for example through GP's.

Mrs Wilson questioned whether officers were working effectively with schools, and felt that there had been instances in the past where engagement had been one sided, with the local authority not adequately responding to teachers requests. The Committee were assured that this was a two way process and that through the Early Offer of Help and Troubled Families programme, where an officer was based in schools, the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub and the Head teachers Group and Senior Management Team visits to schools there was a strong link, but that it was important schools did challenge the local authority.

Councillor Morris-Cook asked the Head of Children's Social Care and the Director of Children's Services what worried to them. In response the Head of Children's Social Care felt that the authority could improve the identifications target and the Director of Children's Services was worried about the cases that they did not know about, and recognised that it was important to be continually proactive.

#### **RESOLVED:**

- 1. That progress against the Child Sexual Exploitation Action Plan be noted.**

The Head of Children's Social Care felt that the presentation of the action plan could be improved in future so that the Committee could better monitor progress, to which Members agreed that the format could be changed however the Chair advised that she was keen to maintain the 'RAG' Status rating.

The Chair advised that she proposed to bring forward 'Item 9, Multi-Agency Serious Case Review' on the agenda, following which the remaining items would be taken in the order printed. Members were in agreement.

### **37. Youth Cabinet Activity and Impact 2014-15**

The Interim Strategic Lead for Learning and Skills introduced the report which explored the work that the Youth Cabinet had undertaken to explore alternative delivery vehicles for the delivery of youth related activities across Thurrock.

Rev Barlow questioned how well the activities of Youth Cabinet were promoted to other young people across the Borough, to which officers explained that Youth Cabinet members disseminated information in their schools and used Social Media to engage with young people across the Borough.

The Committee were advised that the Youth Cabinet newsletter was circulated via schools, youth activities and across a range of partners.

Councillor Halden expressed his appreciation that Youth Cabinet members were actively involved in the Supporting Pathways into Work for Young People Task and Finish Review. He observed that he wanted to widen Democracy Week beyond Youth Cabinet as he felt that the event had become internalised.

Councillor Ojetola commended the activities of Youth Cabinet and the work that was being done in relation to Democracy Week. He observed that they did not shy away from debating controversial subjects.

Councillor Morris-Cook paid tribute to the hard work of the team and liked the name 'Inspire' which had been selected by young people to brand work going forward. She felt that it was refreshing to see young people engaged in meetings and taking ownership of local issues. She further observed that it was crucial to maintain the level of engagement in future and requested that officers examine whether it was appropriate for young people to be allowed to contribute to the work of other Overview and Scrutiny Committees if possible.

As a result, Councillor Morris-Cook proposed an amendment to recommendation 1.1 in the printed report in order to identify whether young people could add value to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee process in other areas, to which the Committee agreed.

#### **RESOLVED:**

- 1. To continue to support the work undertaken by the Youth Cabinet thus enabling young people to remain at the heart of decision making regarding youth related activities, and to identify whether**

**young people can add value to the Overview and Scrutiny process in other areas.**

- 2. To support members of the Youth Cabinet in the exploration of an alternative vehicle for delivering youth related activities recognising the need to secure savings going forward, whilst ensuring young people remain at the heart of the regeneration agenda.**

**38. A progress report on the Grangewaters Outdoor Education Centre Alternative Delivery Models Project**

The Director of Children's Services introduced the report which detailed the progress that had been made with respect to the work to be undertaken in order to commission out the opportunity to manage Grangewaters Outdoor Education Centre.

Councillor Halden asked when the service would be in a position to produce a 5 year vision for the future of Grangewaters and present the document to the Committee, as he was unclear on what the intention was for Grangewaters in the longer term. In response the Director of Children's Services advised that it was anticipated the work would be completed in the next municipal year in order to coincide with the proposal to develop a Youth Mutual.

Councillor Ojetola thanked the Director of Children's Services for her reassurances at maintaining Grangewaters as a community based asset, and asked what was being done to overcome the legal issues. In response the Committee were advised that officers were working with the Cabinet Office to develop a Youth Mutual, which the Grangewaters project would feed into, and that in the interim important remedial work to improve Health and Safety at the outdoor education centre were being implemented as a priority.

Councillor Kerin asked whether officers had worked with other similar providers, such as nearby Stubbers. The Director of Children's Services advised that she felt well informed about all the options and a business model had captured information from similar outdoor activity centres, but highlighted that some organisations were very different and operated within the commercial sector.

Rev Barlow asked how the final decision would be made and how criteria would be weighted, whether in favour of best value for money or the best structure to serve the community.

The Director of Children's Services reassured Members that she wanted the Committee to have full sight of what the criteria would be and felt that any decision should be weighed against what best served the community in order to make best use of the site and extend weekend opening hours.

Members were advised that the full criteria would be referred back to the Committee for consideration before any final decision was made regarding the future of Grangewaters.

The Committee welcomed this proposal and further requested that an update report be brought back to the Committee at an appropriate time during the following municipal year.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1. That members note the content of this report intended to provide an update on the Grangewaters Alternative Delivery Models project.**
- 2. That it be agreed a further update report be scheduled for the 2015/16 municipal year and a separate report to set out the criteria be referred to the Committee for consideration and comments at an appropriate time before a final decision regarding the future of Grangewaters is reached.**

*Councillor Halden left the meeting at 8.18pm.*

**39. Pupil Place Plan 2015-2019**

The Strategic Lead for the Operations, Resources and Libraries Unit introduced the report which outlined the latest draft version of the Pupil Place Plan (2015-2019) and detailed the forecast of pupil place requirements and the creation of a Schools Forum Pupil Place Planning Sub Group. In introducing the report the following points were highlighted:

- That there was a high demand in Thurrock for in-year pupil places.
- In 2013/14 146 children had moved into Thurrock from overseas and 366 had moved into Thurrock from elsewhere in the UK.
- In the five months from September 2014 to January 2015 this target had been exceeded with 199 children coming to Thurrock from overseas and 493 from within the UK, which had created demand in-year for an additional 692 places.
- It was reported that this additional demand had eaten into the surplus of places Thurrock did have but that Thurrock had a contingency target of 7%, although only 2% of additional places were funded by government.

Councillor Ojetola welcomed the involvement of the service at meetings of the Planning Committee which assisted Planning Committee Members take into account educational issues, and questioned officers and received responses as follows:

- That he had hoped to see the Admissions Report which would be relevant to examine in conjunction with the Pupil Place Planning report.

The Director of Children's Services highlighted that the Committee had agreed at the previous meeting that a briefing note would be

circulated on Admissions instead of a formal report due to the volume of business to be transacted at the last meeting of the municipal year.

- Whether the delay of the opening of the Harris Academy Free School in Chafford Hundred had been factored into the Pupil Place Plan and how the service would plan for further demand on in-year pupil places.

The Strategic Lead for the Operations, Resources and Libraries Unit explained that the recent news that the opening of the Harris Academy Free School would be delayed had not been factored into the draft Pupil Place Plan but that it would be included in the finalised document.

The Committee were further advised that the local authority were required to build in between 5-10% of surplus places into the plan and that Thurrock provided 7% of surplus places which was well within the recommended guidelines, despite the fact that funding was only provided for 2%.

Councillor Kerin observed that every local authority was obliged to provide sufficient school places and was concerned that if plans for the new Harris Academy Free School had completely fallen through then Thurrock Council would have been required to resolve the issues that this created.

The Director of Children's Services advised that there was sufficient provision without the Harris Academy Free School, and that if this had not been the case plans would have been developed as an alternative back-up option. The Committee were advised that the service had been informed of the delay of the opening of the Harris Academy Free School two days prior to admissions letters being sent to parents and that although the whole admissions process could not be rerun at this late stage, suitable places had been identified for all children affected.

Councillor Kerin asked whether there was a point when officers would be concerned regarding a lack of uptake at a school, and highlighted that out of 120 places available at Harris Academy Free School there were only 90 applicants.

The Committee were informed that generally when a new school opened up it was often under subscribed until it became more established, and that in the case of the three form entry Harris Academy Free School it would be opened gradually, with the full 120 school places available from September 2016.

Councillor Kerin questioned whether further schools needed to be opened in other parts of the Borough, to which officers explained that there was demand on school places across the authority but that school expansions were the most appropriate way to meet this demand. Members were further advised

that due to the housing development in Purfleet a new school would be required to serve that area.

Councillor Curtis observed that often residents in South Ockendon were not successful in securing their first choice school and was concerned that this would worsen with the new housing development on the old ford factory site. He advised that this was particularly problematic for parents when they were offered places for siblings at different schools.

Officers explained that the new housing development in South Ockendon had been taken into account and included in the forecasts. Members were advised that an additional 210 places had been created at Bonnygate Primary School through the expansion scheme, but that the latest Pupil Place Plan identified that more work needed to be undertaken in that area. Officers recognised that there was demand to place siblings in the same school and that the service worked to achieve this wherever possible.

The Committee were advised that places were ready for the September intake and that some schools would be working with temporary accommodation in addition to the permanent expansion of two schools.

Members were informed that it was difficult to permanently expand schools with one year funds but that the team worked hard to plan long-term and secure capital investment.

Members welcomed the clustering of schools and were advised that if a child did not receive their first preference of a school place other schools in that cluster would be examined, although applications could cut across cluster groups.

Rev Barlow highlighted that the greatest demand on school places was in the Chafford Hundred and Grays area rather than to the East of the Borough, and felt that this could be exacerbated by future developments in and around Grays. Officers assured Members that with the expansion schemes and new school there was no danger that there would not be sufficient school places in Grays, however this was always examined in the consideration of planning developments and developers could be required to build a new school under the Section 106 agreement.

Councillor Morris-Cook felt that it was important the use of temporary accommodation was avoided wherever possible and questioned whether there was enough special education provision to meet demand. In response the Committee were advised that officers were looking to create additional places at Treetops School but that there was less pressure on Beacon Hill.

The Director of Children's Services advised that the service was looking to undertake a review of Specialist Educational Needs places across the Borough and that there was specific demand in relation to autism.

**RESOLVED:**

1. That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee comments on the draft forecasts, the proposed amendments to Planning Areas and the introduction of the Schools Forum Pupil Place Planning Sub Group be noted.
2. The Chair thanked the Director of Children's Services, her team and Democratic Services for all their help over the past municipal year.

The meeting finished at 8.47 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](mailto:Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk)