

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 July 2017 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Bukky Okunade (Chair), Graham Snell (Vice-Chair), David Potter, Joycelyn Redsell and Angela Sheridan

Apologies: Councillor Aaron Watkins
Myra Potter, Parent Governor Representative

In attendance: George Wright, Thurrock Youth Cabinet Chair
Enisa Burzic, Thurrock Youth Cabinet Member
Adam O'Shea, Thurrock Youth Cabinet Member
Rory Patterson, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Roger Edwardson, Interim Strategic Leader School Improvement, Learning and Skills
Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director of Children's Services
Sue Green, Strategic Leader Early Years, Families & Communities
Clare Moore, Strategic Lead Children's Social Care
Joseph Tynan, Service Manager – Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), Children and Families Assessment Team (CFAT) and the Emergency Duty Team
Patrick Kielty, Participation Officer
Charlotte Raper, 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.

44. Minutes

The minutes of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 1 February 2017 were approved as a correct record.

45. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

46. Declaration of Interests

Councillor Sheridan declared that her daughter currently attended St Clere's School.

47. Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board

No issues were raised by the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board.

48. Youth Cabinet and Youth Work Report 2016/17

The Youth Cabinet introduced the report with a video which was scripted, filmed and edited by Members to promote the Youth Cabinet within Thurrock. The Chair of Thurrock Youth Cabinet outlined the work undertaken by Thurrock Youth Cabinet.

The Participation Officer then presented the report which highlighted the work of the Thurrock Youth Cabinet and the wider activities of the Inspire Youth Work team in 2016/17.

The Chair welcomed Members of the Youth Cabinet and expressed her satisfaction that the Youth Cabinet in Thurrock was so strong and so well organised. She asked why there was lower attendance to the South Ockendon Youth Club. The Participation Officer outlined that the Tilbury Youth Club had been established for around 50 years and was held in a Council-owned building. The South Ockendon club had partly arisen due to concerns from Schools in the area, Thurrock Council and the Police and had only been in place since February. It would take time to build relationships but there had begun to be a regular group and it was hoped this would expand with time. Councillor Potter asked where it was held. Members were advised that the club met every Monday from 6:30pm – 8:00pm in the Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions building, on Derwent Parade.

Councillor Redsell felt that Democracy Week was not a long enough period of time and asked what the result of the previous year's had been. She added that at times the Youth Cabinet was not as well advertised as it might be and that she would like to see more Councillors get involved. The Participation Officer advised that Democracy Week was an effort to engage with School Councils, as many young people had joined as a result. It was hoped that this year more schools would be involved.

Councillor Snell advised that he was a Member of the Stifford Clays Hub and they were excited to see a Youth Club develop, but also wanted to know what they could offer to assist the team. He expressed his view that members of the Youth Cabinet were universally impressive and reiterated that they should approach Councillors if they needed any assistance.

The Chair of the Youth Cabinet agreed that input from Councillors would be useful to help influence the Youth Cabinet's outlook and debates shaped campaigns. He accepted that the reach was not as widespread as hoped, hence the production of the video. There were efforts to reach out to as many schools as possible but membership fluctuated, which sometimes left schools unrepresented and harder to access. There were particular issues around how to present to primary schools and how to prevent older members becoming detached from the younger years. The Youth Cabinet would welcome help and guidance from Councillors.

The Chair congratulated the Youth Cabinet for all they had achieved and urged Councillors to get more involved when possible.

RESOLVED:

That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- 1) Note the work of the Thurrock Youth Cabinet and the wider Inspire Youth Work Team in 2016/17**
- 2) Support the work plans of the Thurrock Youth Cabinet and Inspire Youth Work Team in 2017/18**
- 3) Support the production of a 2017/18 annual report; promoting youth work and activity to external partners and potential funders**

49. Ofsted Inspection Action Plan - Update

The Corporate Director of Children's Services introduced the report which provided the Committee with a further update following the inspection which took place in February 2016.

The Chair expressed her view that it was pleasing to see an increase in permanent staff. She queried the figures within the action plan, and why Recommendation showed recurring scores of "3" but was deemed as "improving". Members were advised that the ratings ranged from 1 (achieved) to 5 (a long way to go). The Recommendation in question, recommendation 3, was part of a broader issue around the quality of assessments. There had been a bid to the innovation fund for assistance in introducing the intervention model 'Signs of Safety' however the bid had been unsuccessful. This model was not the only element however. It was a matter of quality assurance, of the quality of practice and the day-to-day work of social workers. It had been rated 3 rather than 1 as other works had been carried out and there was still work to be done around Signs of Safety. Awareness raising work had been undertaken and full training would be held in October both within the service and for external agencies. The Chair asked whether there was confidence that everything was going according to plan around Ofsted recommendations. The Corporate Director of Children's Services stated that he was cautiously optimistic that Ofsted would agree there had been lots of progress.

Councillor Redsell asked what training social workers would receive that they did not currently, and whether the service would join up with education to ensure children could not "slip through the net". She also asked how many children in foster care opted to stay with the family whilst at college or university. The data around "staying put" would be circulated outside of the meeting. The Corporate Director of Children's Services agreed that a joined up system was crucial, to ensure departments were sharing information and supporting each other. The service was working decrease the risk of children "slipping through" with early offers of help and joining up with children's centres. The intervention model aimed to work alongside families for the best outcomes for children. Signs of safety had a positive track record of better engagement and better outcomes.

Councillor Snell echoed previous comments around the improvement shown. He recalled a major issue within the budget had been agency staff and was pleased to see increased retention of permanent staff and foster carers. He asked what impact InPower had made. InPower had offered deep analysis of the systems in place, which was sometimes more effective from a removed perspective. Their input had been invaluable and as a result there had been in depth work undertaken to ensure the service supported families in difficulty before a crisis occurred to prevent children entering care unnecessarily.

Councillor Sheridan referred to the introduction of volunteers in the assessment service and asked whether they would receive full training. The Strategic Leader Early Years, Families & Communities explained that initial scoping, based on other Local Authorities, had been undertaken but a final decision had not yet been made. Members were assured however that if volunteers were introduced it would be subject to full training, full checks and robust supervision.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the current progress and direction of travel in completing the requires actions from the Ofsted Action Plan**
- 2) That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive assurance that action plan continues to deliver the required improvement**

50. Peer Review of Contacts, Referrals and Assessments

The Service Manager – Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), Children and Families Assessment Team (CFAT) and the Emergency Duty Team presented the report which outlined the positive outcomes and an overview of the recommendations and subsequent actions following a Peer Review undertaken by Southend Borough Council.

The Chair congratulated the department for the strengths highlighted within the report. She noted it was pleasing to see that staff morale was high and asked what would be done to guarantee the retention of permanent staff. The Committee was advised that there had been a restructure within the department; 3 teams had become 4 teams with an additional team manager. This meant that there was more support, both emotional and practical, and supervision for staff. Social work was an emotionally difficult job so it was essential that Thurrock Council was a good place to work. The Assistant Director of Children's Services added that within the 6 weeks since she joined the Authority she had seen caseload reviews to ensure that caseloads were reasonable, there were also retention bonuses and strong training to ensure a good working environment.

Councillor Redsell stressed the importance of ensuring all departments were joined together to ensure the best outcomes for children and the service

should work to keep improving. The Corporate Director of Children's Services agreed that it was important to ensure the service continued to be more effective. Departments such as social care, housing and education all needed to work seamlessly and avoid becoming compartmentalised.

The Vice-Chair expressed his approval for the report. The body of the report highlighted a number of positives for the service while the Action Plan showed that the service recognised the issues raised by the Peer Review and then looked more deeply at them to improve the service further. He noted that the Action Plan referred to IT and asked whether the services and agencies had joined up systems or whether data would be duplicated across systems. It was confirmed that IT was an area for development, to make work more effective. The aim was for more robust systems with clear alerts to limit the opportunity for children to "slip through the net". There had already been progression around data performance.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the recommendations of the Review and the Action Plan, to drive up performance in these areas.**
- 2) That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive assurance that the Action Plan will deliver the required improvement.**

51. Children Looked After Placement Commissioning

The Strategic Leader Early Years, Families & Communities presented the report which outlined the rationale for a new approach to ensure the best quality placements would be commissioned to place more young people in the local authority area.

The Vice-Chair expressed his view that the best results were often achieved when Thurrock Council took control of services itself. He added that increased interest in the local market might push it to develop. The Strategic Leader Early Years, Families & Communities agreed that the market needed to be developed, especially regarding the quality of placements available however there would be a rolling contract allowing providers to be added each year. The Children in Care Council would also be involved to influence the specifications for potential providers.

Councillor Redsell asked what could be done to engage more foster carers. The Committee heard that this was an opportunity to discuss the options of individual fostering agencies and in-house foster carers. There were plans for a net increase, in the number of in-house foster carers, of 45 foster families over 3 years. The service would look at how to attract people and where people interested in foster caring might look. It was crucial to get out into the community and make foster caring accessible. Councillor Redsell suggested using local Community Forums to reach more people.

The Chair asked whether a radius would be set when procuring independent fostering agencies. The Strategic Leader Early Years, Families & Communities advised that it would be beneficial to have as many approved providers as possible, to ensure a diverse choice to meet specific needs of individual children. In some cases it would be helpful to place children outside of the local area therefore a broad list would be welcome. It would be outlined to all approved providers however that, when placing children, the service would look as locally as possible in the first instance, starting with in-house foster carers and working outwards. Placements did not need to be pre-purchased it would merely be a list of approved providers.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That Members consider the proposal to simplify and improve the commissioning of placement provision, in particular to withdraw from the current Eastern Regional contract when it ends in 2018.**
- 2) That Members agree to officers proceeding to gain Cabinet approval to commence a procurement exercise.**

52. Work Programme

The Chair noted that there was very little listed on the Work Programme and asked for officers to liaise and circulate an updated draft document outside of the meeting.

The Corporate Director of Children's Services advised Members of a number of reports to be brought before the Committee.

The Chair of Thurrock Youth Cabinet requested to present an item at the September meeting to provide Members with an update on "Make your mark", Democracy Week and YouthCon.

The meeting finished at 8.35 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**