

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10 October 2017 at 7.00 pm

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

Myra Potter, Parent Governor Representative
Lynda Pritchard, Church of England Representative

In attendance: George Wright, Thurrock Youth Cabinet Representative
Adam O' Shea, Thurrock Youth Cabinet Representative
Rory Patterson, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director of Children's Services and Targeted Outcomes
Roger Edwardson, Interim Strategic Leader School Improvement, Learning and Skills
Tina Martin, Statutory & Corporate Complaints Officer
Malcolm Taylor, Strategic Lead Inclusion / Principal Educational Psychologist
Iqbal Vaza, Strategic Lead, Performance Quality and Business Intelligence
Charlotte Raper, Democratic Services Officer
Wendy Le, 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.

53. Minutes

The minutes of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 11 July 2017 were approved as a correct record.

54. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

55. Declaration of Interests

The Parent Governor Representative (PGR), Myra Potter, declared a non-pecuniary interest that she worked at Palmer's College and had children who attended Gable Hall Academy and Little Thurrock Primary School.

56. Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board

There were no representatives from the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board in attendance so no update was provided. The Chair asked the Director of Children's Services (DCS), Rory Patterson, that a representative be present at the next meeting on 12 December 2017 to give an update.

57. Youth Cabinet Update

The Youth Cabinet Representative (YCR), George Wright, stated that with October being democracy month, it was also the end of the 'Make Your Mark' consultation which was the national drive of the British Youth Parliament. It was a chance for 11 – 19 year olds to vote on issues that were important to them from a list of ten issues selected by them at a youth conference over the summer. This year had seen the best turnout for Thurrock yet with over 7,500 turnout to vote which was about 50% of the young people in the borough and a 100% increase from the previous year. The Youth Cabinet were in the process of counting up the most voted on topic for the year which would most likely be the Curriculum for Life or the funding for children's services based on previous years.

The results of the consultation would shape what the Youth Cabinet would be promoting over the coming months. The Curriculum for Life pledge had been stepped up which aimed to promote issues schools did not teach such as finance, sex and relationships. It would also help to shape the Youth Conference that was coming up on 8 December 2017 (to be confirmed) which the Youth Cabinet extended an invitation to all Members in which he hoped to see many of them attending. Schools and colleges would also be invited where students would attend workshops surrounding issues such as drugs, gang crime, Curriculum for Life and the number one issue in Thurrock once that had been confirmed through the consultation. There would be guest speakers which the Youth Cabinet were in the process of planning.

The Youth Cabinet was currently underrepresented in schools as they had lost some representatives from schools over the summer. To show more representation, they would need to go back into their own schools to acquire representatives.

Councillor Redsell noted that the same issues kept arising such as life skills and money issues. She queried whether schools were taking these issues on board. A lot of schools taught citizenship as a selective subject and the Curriculum for Life had been on the Youth Cabinet's agenda for the last three years. Schools had signed up to this pledge but it seemed they were not sticking to this pledge so the Youth Cabinet would need to go back to find out why. It could be down to resources or lack of interest but students should be learning life skills that were not gained from Google. The Youth Cabinet intended to find out what schools were providing.

Councillor Collins asked what the Curriculum for Life pledge included. This covered a broad range of topics and was not yet defined. It was left to the local Youth Cabinet to define and decide what topics to include e.g. finances,

life skills, University applications etc. Some schools offered this to all year groups and some would offer this to targeted year groups. The Youth Cabinet would need to first establish what issues schools were teaching before defining their Curriculum for Life and then the list could be expanded as the young people felt appropriate to.

Councillor Collins also questioned what had been done to incorporate life skills into subjects e.g. teaching life finances in maths. The YCR replied that some schools taught this life skill but it was approached from a Maths approach as opposed to a social approach. He went on to say that it would be wonderful if schools could tie in social skills with standard school subjects.

The PGR asked where the Youth Conference would take place. This would be at the Purfleet Opera House which would be the Youth Cabinet's fourth year there.

The Chair thanked the Youth Cabinet for their update. She asked who communicated the Youth Conference to the Council and public as the Council had not heard anything. This was usually communicated through invitations to the Mayor, local MPs and certain Directors. For this year, the Youth Cabinet hoped to invite more people from the Council through an open invitation which should get more people and young people involved.

58. 2016/17 Annual Complaints and Representations Report

The Statutory & Corporate Complaints Manager (SCCM), Tina Martin, presented the report which highlighted the number of complaints and representations received in the year. There was a three stage process to complaints but the aim was to resolve these swiftly in the first stage. There had been 62 compliments in the reported year. The report also showed the key issues of these complaints and what the service departments could learn from them as it was important to enable the Council to improve services.

The Chair noted compliments had reduced from the previous reported year of 2015/16 and asked what could be done to increase the number of compliments. The SCCM felt there were more compliments but they were not being logged. She intended to speak with the service departments to remind them of the procedure to log compliments as well as complaints.

Councillor Collins referred to the 79% of responses on Members enquiries within the timeframe for the reported year of 2015/16 on page 24 of the agenda and questioned why the other 21% had not been responded to on time. He asked if that had been due to complexity or other reasons. The timeframe for this was shorter and it was not always possible to provide a comprehensive response within the timeframe given. To do so would compromise on the quality of the response. Councillor Collins went on to say it could sometimes take a while to sort through files and find the right answer which could be quite complex. He praised the work the service departments had done and encouraged them to keep up the good work.

Councillor Redsell echoed the Chair's earlier comments regarding the reduction of compliments and asked whether it could be down to people not phoning in to give the compliments. This was reliant on Officers and staff to send the compliments to the generic mailbox that had been set up specifically for compliments to enable them to be logged. The SCCM aimed to address this through a discussion with the service departments to ensure this was being done.

Councillor Redsell referred to the 94 completed complaints at stage one on page 21 of the agenda and noted that out of the 94, two got to stage two and one to stage three. She sought clarification on what happened to the other 91 remaining complaints in stage one. The SCCM explained that those at stage one were not upheld or resolved as the complainant was happy with the outcome. The service departments were also introducing alternative dispute resolution (ADR) whereby if the complainant decided they were not happy after all, a three way meeting would be set up to try to resolve the complaint before escalating to the next stage. This had been working well so far.

The Vice-Chair commented on the root causes of complaints on page 22 of the agenda which he could see a correlation on why people complained. He also commented on the striking amount of complaints that were not upheld on page 23 of the agenda and asked if these were due to high expectations from the Children's Services that would lead to complaints. There were a lot of raised expectations and the departments were not always able to give service users what they wanted. They needed to be clear on what could and could not be delivered. The SCCM felt the number of complaints that were not upheld was positive as it showed the service was providing a good service. From investigations, Officers found some complaints did not have much substance but the team would still provide the service. There were no failings, only raised expectations from service users.

The YCR referred to the increase in the delays in service compared to the previous year on page 22 of the agenda and questioned whether this was due to disgruntled or unhappy people that the Vice-Chair had eluded to in his earlier comments. The delays were related to fitting appointments in to meet with complainants. There were steps to take and people probably felt these took too long.

The Chair referred to one of the root causes on page 22 of the agenda which was staff conduct/attitude and queried what the process was on dealing with this. There were two routes the complaint could follow which was a discussion between the staff member and their line manager or a referral to Human Resources if the complaint was deemed to be very serious. The latter route would mean the complaint would be taken out of the complaints procedure as it would become a staff conduct issue. Most staff complaints were dealt by line managers. The Chair went on to comment that it was good to see a reduction in the number of complaints from the previous reported year of 2015/16. She stated the importance of good first impressions that front line staff should be making as it was a representation of the Council.

Echoing the Chair's comments, Councillor Redsell sought clarification on how often staff were trained in phone etiquette. She mentioned that she had a staff member answer the phone whilst eating which should not have happened. Furthermore, she was able to hear the conversation in the background. She felt it did not give a good impression of the Council and this was the first impression the people would have of the Council. The DCS agreed that the first point of contact was important but no formal training was given. Staff were expected to behave to a professional and respectful standard. There was training on treating people respectfully for social workers which was paramount.

The Church of England Representative (CER), Lynda Pritchard, thought the ADR was a good idea but was interested to know on the wording of the last sentence in the paragraph regarding ADR on page 26 of the agenda. She sought clarification on what meeting with complainants 'where possible' meant and whether it was the complainant or the Council that determined 'if escalation was appropriate' for the complaint. The Complaints Team would meet with complainants if possible as it was easier to talk face to face than in writing, but some complainants preferred to email instead. The SCCM would look at how the complaint could be resolved and whether the stage one process had answered all the issues of the complaint. The service departments would also advise complainants that they could go to the ombudsman if they felt their complaint had not been dealt with satisfactorily.

Before all Members agreed on the report's recommendations, Councillor Redsell pointed out that it was fine to note the report but she would like a follow up on certain issues that had been brought up such as staff training. It was agreed a follow up would be provided.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider and note the report.**

59. Schools Performance

The report was presented by the Officer for Interim Strategic Leader School Improvement, Learning and Skills (ISLSILS), Roger Edwardson, which showed comparisons of expected standards of learning shown in charts and tables for the stages of Early Years Foundation, Year 1 Phonics, Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. These compared the results of Thurrock to the national average in which key stage 1's results for Thurrock was above the national average. Reading, Writing and Maths combined for the expected standards of key stage 2 showed Thurrock was in line with the national average but the graph under the Two Year trends section on page 35 of the agenda showed the Reading to Greater Depth Standard (GDS) data had a lower outcome than the national average.

The report was unable to show a comparison of Thurrock to the national average for GCSEs as the national data had not yet been released. The

Officer for ISLSILS planned to bring this data back to the Committee once it was released. On another note, out of the 23 children in care entered into GCSEs, eight had passed. The Officer for ISLSILS stated that raising achievement in all areas of education remained a key priority.

Councillor Redsell noted the key stage 1 graph for GDS on page 33 of the agenda revealed low outcomes for Thurrock. The Officer for ISLSILS agreed the outcomes were low and that Maths had been a challenge. Councillor Redsell went on to query the reading outcome and whether this was down to children not reading enough or on the computer too much. Reading was assessed through tests and the quality was not good. The test was probably done on computers.

Councillor Redsell also questioned if reading was better in boys or girls. The Officer for ISLSILS replied that girls did better in reading. Councillor Redsell went on to comment that it was not always down to schools to teach. It was also down to parents to teach their children by reading to them as it would help with spelling and grammar.

Councillor Sheridan mentioned that as the GCSE grading was now numbered as opposed to its previous alphabetised grading, it was probably more difficult to grade for teachers. She anticipated that next year's performance should be better as teachers should be more confident. She would be interested to hear back the progress on the 11 – 16 year olds. She went on to agree with Councillor Redsell's comments and thought boys tended to have a lack of concentration at first and later on, had better concentration. Regarding reading, she said children would tend to read more as they got older as they would be able to choose their own books to read. The Officer for ISLSILS agreed and felt that the change to end of year assessments only, had probably benefitted girls more than boys.

Referring to page 37 of the agenda, Councillor Collins noted that there had been some good pass rates for A Level results. He asked what percentage of the pass rate had been for Maths and Science. The Officer for ISLSILS did not have the percentage specific to Maths and Science to hand but he had figures for Science, Technology, English and Maths (STEM) which were high. He would send the figures specific figures of pass rates for Maths, English and Science to the Chair.

The PGR questioned whether the low figures in the GDS could be due to teachers being under pressure to get children to a 'secure' position and not concentrating on children who were 'secure plus' when working at a greater depth. The term greater depth was an Ofsted term which referred to children working to a higher level. The answer was not simple as this varied from school to school. Quarry Hill Primary School was one of the schools that had achieved almost 100% with nearly 70% achieving the expected level. Opportunities should be extended to all students but when there was a class of 30, the focus was generally in the middle of the class with little focus on the underachievers and the more able were not challenged enough.

The CER commented that they needed to be careful in attributing fault to tests as these were national tests. They should be looking at neighbouring boroughs to check who was doing better through sitting the same tests. The Officer for ISLSILS said that they had not yet received the figures for the Eastern region but would be getting them through soon. He was not blaming the tests but could see a shift in focus.

The YCR referred to the GCSE results chart on page 36 of the agenda and noted it showed a rise in pass rates for Thurrock over the compared years. This meant more young people could get into A Levels. He asked if the Council could do more to encourage young people to take A Levels. The Officer for ISLSILS replied that although most schools were now academies, there needed to be more focus on 16+ year olds in order to get them further.

Referring to appendix one of the report, Councillor Redsell questioned why there was data missing for Woodside and Treetops on some of the tables. The Officer for ISLSILS would send this data through once it was received from the schools.

The Chair questioned how the Progress 8 system mentioned on page 37 of the agenda in regards to GCSEs, was value added measure and how it could be ensured that performance was being monitored. The Officer for ISLSILS explained that the system had eight subjects and the department had a baseline for entry into year seven. Based on that baseline, they judged the performance against the GCSE performance to see if children had made progress or not. It was a better system than the attainment system as there was a different starting point for each individual child. Depending on where the child was in their baseline, they were able to demonstrate if they had progressed or not. It was quantified against zero, minus or plus figures.

The YCR sought clarification on how the Progress 8 system measured progress for students who were already at the highest grades upon entry. The Officer explained that if a pupil had the highest grades at GCSEs, then the progress would be positive.

With some data yet to be received, the Members felt that recommendation 1.1 should be amended.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Committee note the provisional outcomes of the summer 2017 tests and examinations.**
- 2) That the Committee recognises that data can't be compared to previous years due to a change in curriculum and assessment methods.**

60. Peer Review Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Support across the Local Area

The Officer for Strategic Lead Inclusion / Principal Educational Psychologist (SLI / PEP), Malcolm Taylor, provided an overview of the results of the Regional Peer Review of the current support offered for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). This was based on a team of colleagues from Cambridgeshire, Bedford Borough, Southend and Peterborough Local Authorities. A high level action plan summary with expected timeframes of completion was drawn up from the results which included:

- Developing a Governance Plan to be approved by SEND Strategic Board;
- Producing an overarching Local Area SEND plan with parents representative groups; and
- To actively recruit additional members as part of the Parent Carer Forum development plan.

Councillor Collins questioned why there had been a change from 18 to 25 year olds. The Officer for SLI / PEP explained that the previous age had been 19 but only a small number of those people were attending a sixth form or a special school. Those who had left the special school or college had a LDA assessment which led to the identification that these were of a much lower level. So now that age would go up to 25 if the person was in receipt of educational training. Councillor Collins went on to query the type of training. This could include formal courses at local colleges, foundation skills courses or some might be programmes towards independence and any that would count as learning difficulties as they would be able to continue on the health care plans (HCP). There were some young people who had continued to stay in special schools up to the age of 18 and they would remain on the HCP. It was still early days but there were few specialist placement colleges that had a range of programmes suitable for young people including those with visual impairment and could offer support through a plan. Councillor Collins went on to ask what the cost impact was. There was an increase on high needs funding although it was separated amongst each specialty, the costs came out from one pot. More young people were accessing that support and the Officer for SLI / PEP would be reviewing the fund with the finance team to discuss the impact this had on the fund.

Councillor Redsell mentioned that as the Pupil Referral Unit in South Ockendon had been shut down, she sought clarification on whether this was still going to Tilbury. The Officer for SLI / PEP confirmed the Olive Alternative Provision Academy would be based on the old Jack Lobley site as planned. An official opening was yet to happen but pupils were already in the building working on a range of programmes and for a monitoring visit from Ofsted. The unit was now a secondary unit and no longer a primary Pupil Referral Unit as it had been before. This would be facilitated through other arrangements which the department was working on with other primary schools. Councillor Redsell asked if these plans would be brought back to the Committee's attention to which the Officer for SLI / PEP confirmed it would.

Councillor Redsell thought that there had always been three special needs schools. There were three, Treetops, Beacon Hill and now Olive Alternative Provision Academy which went up to the age of 19. The post 16 – 19 in Treetops and Beacon Hill was located in the main site of Treetops. Other resources were attached to primary and secondary schools which included hearing and visual impairment, learning difficulties and speech impairment etc.

Councillor Redsell said that she had received feedback from parents about overcrowding in Treetops and appeared to have out of borough people coming in as well. She had thought Treetops was for Thurrock only and sought clarification on this. The Officer for SLI / PEP stated that the top academies – Treetops and Beacon Hill, had attracted people from areas outside of the borough. He had spoken with Treetops and understood they had plans to become a free school. There were always requests from out of boroughs but no places were reserved. Councillor Redsell went on to ask whether Thurrock residents would get first priority for a place or not. The Officer for SLI / PEP confirmed they would not because an academy did not have the right to restrict places to local people due to British laws. Treetops could push back on requested placements but anyone from any area could request a placement and whether they got a place was dependent on their circumstances. Both Treetops and Beacon Hill were outstanding schools and due to their quality, they had been able to expand.

The Vice-Chair mentioned that there was a lot of clarification sought around the needs of SEND pupils. He asked whether the action plan outlined in appendix two was able to achieve this. Thurrock was working with Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCo) to look at criterias to move forward in HCPs. There needed to be clarity of understanding on what was expected and to give further advice which would be discussed in a meeting in November.

The Chair expressed concern on task number eight of the action plan as the timeframe given to complete the task was the end of October. It was confirmed that the SEND team had met with the Parent Carer Forum (CaPa) so they would be on target to complete the task. The Chair went on to ask what the percentage increase would be. Not enough information had been captured yet so they were using SENCos to do some direct work and were working with CaPa as well.

The CER noted that the first item on the action plan was three weeks away and queried whether it was within the remit of the committee to have an update. If the action plan was important, would it also be within the remit of the Committee to receive an update of the action plan. The Chair agreed the Committee should receive an update and asked if these could come back to the Committee at a later date. The Officer for SLI / PEP agreed to feedback.

RESOLVED:

1) That the Committee consider the recommendations of the Peer Review and the High Level Action Plan.

61. Children's Social Care Performance

The DCS stated the importance of informing Members on the performance of Children's Services. He outlined the report which highlighted the high level of demand placed on Thurrock's statutory social care service for children. A badly run social care system would face the consequences of potentially being taken over by the Government and having to form a Trust. The service needed more permanent social workers to manage the volume of work to address the level of demand. The department was also focussing on recruiting more foster carers so that children could be looked after by Thurrock's own foster carers.

Councillor Redsell questioned the number of people leaving and coming into social care work. She followed on with another question regarding Children Looked After (CLA) from other local authorities (LA) in private homes within Thurrock. Other LAs could place their CLA in private homes within Thurrock but they were responsible for the CLA and had to notify us of the CLA in the private homes within Thurrock. This placed pressure on services within Thurrock as CLA would attend our schools, use the GPs etc. There had been no figures on staff turnover in social care but it should be low. The Children's Services department were doing well in recruiting and retaining staff as they were quite competitive in quality, training and safety. The DCS would be able to get the actual figures in staff turnover for social care.

Councillor Collins sought clarification on the number of unaccompanied asylum seekers mentioned in the report for CLA. There were 38 and this figure was a comparison out of 318. Councillor Collins went on to ask what the average ages were for missing children. The Assistant Director for Children's Services and Targeted Outcomes (ADCSTO), Sheila Murphy, said the average age was 15 – 16 but there were some 17 year olds who would go missing. Very few younger children tended to go missing. Councillor Collins further asked whether they were found again. Most were found quickly in a short space of time and those found the next day were often at parties, with family members or other places they had not been given permission to go to. There was currently a 16 year old girl who had been missing for four months and was being tracked through her social media and phone records. The police were involved in trying to locate her but had not found her yet. There were procedures in place regarding missing children and the department also had regular strategic meetings with the police. Once the girl was found, the plan was to put her in a welfare secure home to ensure she did not run away again.

The Vice-Chair expressed concern over the missing girl and hoped that she would be found soon. Regarding the referral figures on page 73 of the agenda, he said it was an improvement but asked if these figures were currently standing still. The Officer for Strategic Lead, Performance Quality and Business Intelligence (SLPQBI), Iqbal Vaza, replied that these figures

were a comparison to the previous year and this year saw Children's Services performing better. The referrals were down but they were still above the Eastern region averages. The Officer for SLPQBI were waiting for the published data to confirm. The Vice-Chair went on to comment on the difficulty of comparing other regions to Thurrock given its geographical location. Some LAs were similar to Thurrock but none were very similar. The department was working with colleagues to investigate on the reasons for the high number of referrals.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Committee note a new performance management framework has been introduced by the DCS following the recommendation from Ofsted.**
- 2) That the Committee note the areas of improvement in children's social care, high demand in Thurrock for statutory social care services in comparison to England and eastern region average, and highlight areas of further investigation for deep dive studies.**

62. Ofsted Inspection Action Plan - Update

The DCS provided an update to the Ofsted Inspection Action Plan report which followed on from the recommendations of the Ofsted Report. There was a reduction in agency staff and the department had vacant posts that they were looking to recruit into. The workforce was getting more stable and there was a rolling programme of recruitment. The department aimed to bring in more foster carers so that children could be placed locally. More regular audits would also be carried out with social workers to ensure processes were running smoothly.

The PGR questioned why the recruitment drive for foster carers was taking place in Grays town centre when there were not many people who would go there. She thought a better location would be Lakeside shopping centre as it was a busier location. The DCS agreed and would look into the location again.

Echoing this, Councillor Redsell also felt other areas such as Corringham could be used for the recruitment drive. She also hoped the instability in the workforce was improving. The DCS said there was an issue on resources which needed broadening. He agreed to take on board the advice of using other areas for the recruitment drive. Referring to Councillor Redsell's workforce comment, he said the department was improving and they had been nominated for an award as well. He realised that social work was an ongoing process and could never be complacent with it. The ADCSTO also pointed out that the instability in the workforce within the report had been a reference to the position at the Ofsted inspection from 18 months ago.

Referring to the action plan in appendix one of the report, the CER asked if this plan was on track. The actions had to be implemented but it was never a

done job. To keep on track, the department would need to keep revisiting and refreshing actions.

Councillor Sheridan questioned the rates of independent foster agencies (IFA) and whether these differed from the Council rates. IFAs received a higher rate for their placements and the IFA would also take a percentage of that fee, the total fee did not go straight to the foster carers they employed.

Councillor Redsell noted that some of the actions in the action plan were quite complicated. She asked what they were improving on if they were improving. The DCS stated that they would be producing a clearer version of the action plan.

RESOLVED:

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

63. Work Programme

Councillor Collins asked for an update to be provided on the missing girl.

The Members requested that the updates of the published data for GCSEs from the Schools Performance report to be brought back to the next committee on 12 December 2017.

The Members requested an update to the action plan discussed in the SEND report which would be brought back as a full review to the committee on 13 February 2018.

The meeting finished at 9.12 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**