

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 13 February 2018 at 7.00 pm

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

Lynda Pritchard, Church of England Representative

In attendance: Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director of Children's Care and Targeted Outcomes
Malcolm Taylor, Strategic Lead - Learner Support
Michele Lucas, Interim Assistant Director of Education, Learning and Skills
David Archibald, Independent Chair of local Children's Safeguarding Board
Adam Shea, Youth Cabinet Member
Grace Okutubo, Youth Cabinet Member
Mercy Okutubo, Youth Cabinet Member
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.

78. Apologies

Apologies were given by:

- Corporate Director of Children's Services, Rory Patterson.
- Youth Cabinet Chair, George Wright.
- Parent Governor Representative, Myra Potter, who had ended her term as a School Governor in January 2018.

79. Minutes

Councillor Collins stated that the minuted text on paragraph two on page 15 was incorrect. This would be amended to:

Following on from Councillor Spillman's query and the Officers' response, Councillor Collins sought clarification on whether the academy systems were robust and able to sort problems as and when they occurred. The ISLSILS answered that there were good and outstanding schools within the Borough. The PRU had been the worst performing institution which was why the new provision in East Tilbury Primary School, was put in. The Jack Lumley site was also promising which was the right solution to encourage children to stay in mainstream education.

The minutes for the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 12 December 2017 were approved subject to the changes suggested.

80. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business. However, the Chair wished to discuss Councillor Halden's email response to the Committee on the Head Start Housing policy for Care Leavers Plan.

During the Minutes agenda item, Councillor Spillman stated that he did not feel the minutes for the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 12 December 2017 were a true reflection of the meeting. This was particularly in regards to the report on 'Pilot Development of Head Start Housing for Care Leavers and Vulnerable Young People'. He went on to point out Councillor Halden's response email, provided to the Committee, had not provided a satisfactory response to what the Committee had asked for.

Councillor Spillman highlighted that he still wished to explore a broad range of options to be presented to the Committee with an explanation of how these were picked out to be the best options. With the discretionary exemption of council tax from 21 years old, he felt there needed to be an explanation on what the discretionary included. These options had not been provided in the last report which was why the Committee had asked for the paper to be brought back. The Chair asked if Officers could provide some information on the matter. The Interim Assistant Director for Learning, Inclusion and Skills (IADLIS), Michele Lucas, understood what the Committee was asking for and would look into the Committee's comments.

Councillor Collins questioned if there was a decision model that the Council used. The IADLIS answered that the service had carried out a fair amount of work on the paper. As she had not been at the last Committee meeting, she had not heard the debate so did not want to comment on the levels of detail. She did not want to mislead the Committee which she felt would not be helpful at that stage. It would be for the Committee to make a decision but said the Committee would already be aware that 18 – 21 year olds would have full exemption from council tax and acknowledged that a certain percentage would benefit from that.

In response, Councillor Collins sought clarification on there being no decision model to decide which care leavers got the council tax exemption. Adding to this, Councillor Spillman felt other factors had contributed to the council tax exemption for 21 – 25 year olds which explained why no set or basic criterias could be provided to be discussed. Councillor Collins agreed and also stated that having a decision model in place would have enabled the Committee to scrutinise it and why there was a need to have a discretionary exemption up to the age of 25. He felt it would be helpful if the Committee put together what discretionary exemptions could be included to provide a more structured discussion if the paper was brought back to the Committee.

The Chair stated that the decision made by Cabinet on the Head Start Housing Policy for Care Leavers Plan should be called in. The Vice-Chair supported this view. Councillor Redsell added that the Committee had to be sure that the paper was looked at properly and dissected.

81. Declaration of Interests

The Church of England Representative (CER), Lynda Pritchard, declared that she worked for a private fostering agency and that she was the designated safeguarding officer.

82. Youth Cabinet Update

An update was provided by the Youth Cabinet Members who said they had been welcomed to judge the Civic Awards 2018 on the Lifelong Achievement. There had been some great stories which had been heart-warming.

In January, a few of the Youth Cabinet members had attended guidance meetings which had been insightful on how crime rates could be improved in Thurrock to ensure young people felt safe as a group. Referring to the recent 'Make Your Mark' and 'Life Curriculum' results, the surveys were completed and the results were due to be presented to headteachers in March 2018. The Youth Cabinet had also met with Transport Officer, John Pope and discussed incidences of children not receiving a child bus ticket despite wearing school uniform. Concerns had also been raised on blind spots around bus stops and schools.

Recently, the Youth Cabinet had met with Thurrock's Chief Executive, Lyn Carpenter, who had given a talk on the future plans of Thurrock. The talk had been insightful as it outlined the Local Plan to build more houses and secondary schools in Purfleet and Stanford-Le-Hope which would make Thurrock more of a community.

Referring to children not being given bus tickets, the Chair asked what action had been taken. The Youth Cabinet member answered that they were waiting to hear back from John Pope but there had been no further incidents since. Councillor Redsell mentioned that she was part of the Bus User Group and would bring this up at the next meeting.

Councillor Spillman asked the Youth Cabinet members if any particular items had been brought up in their meeting with the Chief Executive and if they thought there was anything the Borough needed. The Youth Cabinet replied that there was the introduction of a possible Youth Mayor which would enable the young people to become more involved and better represented. Following up, Councillor Collins asked if there was anything the Youth Cabinet wanted to see physically in the Borough such as youth clubs. Youth Cabinet members would like more sporting clubs especially in regards to football teams. They gave an example of the Little Thurrock Dynamos football team who did not have a home ground. Councillor Redsell said Blackshots Field had training grounds which had recently been revamped along with a few others. The

Chair asked Councillor Redsell if this was publicised enough to which she replied it was on the website and through Sports Council meetings.

Councillor Spillman mentioned a conversation with the Chief Executive of Aveley Football Club who had said there were less football clubs due to the lack of money and people willing to coach. There was a need to encourage more civic engagement and activities that young people could rely on. Councillor Redsell added that they raised a lot of money for sports without the Council's help and that there were many ways to get funding as well. The CER also mentioned that Thurrock ran a volunteering scheme which was not publicised enough. The Chair asked Officers to check who ran the volunteer schemes and what could be done to help the Youth Cabinet.

83. Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board Annual Report 2016 - 2017

The Local Safeguarding Children Board's Independent Chair (LSCBIC), David Archibald, gave an overview of the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board's (LSCB) Annual Report 2016 – 17. The Annual Report was a statutory requirement to be provided to the Local Authority which outlined the effectiveness of safeguarding in the local area.

There had been a good level of engagement from key agencies across the Borough to ensure good safeguarding arrangements. With the new act due to be implemented, Thurrock LSCB would be working with a new strategic group to build the new safeguarding framework which would be built upon the current one. Government was drafting a guidance which would become formal by May 2018 following which proposals for the new arrangements for Thurrock would be drafted. Thurrock LSCB was continuing to build upon its previous strengths to ensure safeguarding continued to work well.

Referring to the last Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting, the Chair sought clarification on the removal of some agencies that Thurrock LSCB had been working with but that Thurrock LSCB would still be working with some of these. The LSCBIC answered that LSCB discussions in Thurrock had emphasised the need to create new arrangements which met government guidance, but retained the involvement and contribution of the current range of partners.

Querying on children's mental health, Councillor Redsell noted that there was not much mentioned within the report. She asked what work and safeguarding would be undertaken for children with mental health issues. The LSCBIC stated this was an important subject and work was being done in that area. Little was mentioned within the report as the focus was on safeguarding.

Councillor Collins thanked the LSCBIC for the comprehensive report. Referring to page 29 of the report in regards to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), he asked how far down the road were the LSCB on combating this issue. The LSCBIC replied that there had been a national debate on this and that it was a priority within Thurrock. A meeting had taken place last month

with the police which had recognised the importance of FGM. There had been a strong openness with a view to prosecute where necessary.

Referring to page 40 of the report, Councillor Collins asked how many children had gone missing and whether this was from home or from care. The LSCBIC stated this was a combination of both from home and from care. He had been impressed by the mechanisms of Thurrock Council to monitor missing children and the call for police to take action where necessary. He referred to a recent case in London where a good working relationship had been established between the police and the Local Authority to find a missing child. The Assistant Director for Children's Care and Targeted Outcomes (ADCCTO), Sheila Murphy, stated that some of the children that went missing were the same ones who went missing frequently and comparatively, Thurrock was below the comparator group on missing children.

The CER queried what the greatest challenge the Thurrock LSCB faced and how this would be addressed effectively. The LSCBIC said it was the balance of resources and demand. Demands tended to rise when children were identified in cases of FGM, child sexual exploitation and missing children and further tightened resources. There had been a lot of publicity in the last few weeks about the struggles many councils had in regards to funding for children's services. From the Ofsted report from two years ago, there had been two action points identified which the LSCB was making good progress on. One included how to measure the effectiveness of children's safeguarding training which was being done through feedback from people who had undergone the training. The second action point was how the LSCB extracted and distilled information from case audits to feedback to practitioners to enable them to improve their performance.

Referring to page 56 of the report, the Vice-Chair voiced his concern on children searching methods of suicide at Palmer's College. He questioned if this statistic was only within Palmer's College and if there were statistics on this in other schools. The LSCBIC answered that part of the report had been provided by Palmer's College so was unable to answer regarding other schools. He stated that suicide was a serious issue and would be addressed. The Vice-Chair went on to say he would like to see more information on this issue and how it was monitored by schools.

In regards to looked after children, Councillor Spillman asked why a proportion of them were placed outside the Borough. The ADCCTO said some had been placed outside for welfare reasons such as keeping them away from dangerous people or other influences. Some were due to placement choice and on availability. Councillor Spillman went on to ask for reassurance that children were not being placed outside the Borough as it was cheaper. The ADCCTO answered that it was due to placement availability and that Thurrock would contact the Local Authority that the child was to be placed in beforehand. Out of Borough placed children were still visited by a Thurrock social worker in addition to the Local Authority. Thurrock would also speak with the Local Authority to ensure the child was looked after.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report and progress made on children's safeguarding.**
- 1.2 That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee provided comments on the report.**

84. Children's Social Care Development Plan 2018 - 19

Presented by the ADCCTO, the report set out the revised Children's Social Care Development Plan 2018-19 which built upon the Ofsted Improvement Plan. 8 priority action areas had been identified and listed in the Development Plan in appendix 1 for the service to improve upon. The plan took a systems approach where it would involve an annual conversation with Ofsted where the service would produce a self-evaluation which would also be shared with the Committee.

The service for children looked after had not been consistent so the Brighter Intervention Service had been established to strengthen the service's approach to early intervention and prevention. Workshops were being run to talk social workers through what pathway care plans were good. The aim was to drive out inconsistency so every child would get the same service. Overall, the plan continued to effectively progress on and additional input would be provided where needed to ensure progress remained on track.

Pointing out the summary sheet on appendix 1, the Chair queried the meaning of the numbers in the RAG summary of all areas column. The ADCCTO explained the numbers were populated to show the overall RAG rating of all 8 priorities. It meant the service had improved on their plan slightly.

Councillor Spillman mentioned that he had seen a number of social workers who had not received the support they had needed so he welcomed the workshops. He expressed concern on customer service levels from officers which should be of a qualitative standard. He asked how confident the service was in ensuring this. The ADCCTO responded that officers were expected to treat service users with respect which was monitored through feedback from families and direct observation from managers. The ADCCTO went on to say that standards were analysed from the tone of service users through meetings, letters and correspondences. A quality assurance framework was in place along with a recently recruited post to look into and ensure standards of quality. Collated feedback was also analysed to enable it to be used to further professional development. The workshops for social workers intended to provide a quick two hour learning session that was taught by experts and feedback would be taken from these as part of quality audits to check if it would bring about the improvements the service was looking for. Councillor Spillman went on to ask how the service dealt with negative feedback. The ADCCTO answered that complaints were investigated with some upheld where standards had not been delivered.

Referring to priority seven on appendix 1, Councillor Collins sought clarification in the Ofsted recommendation between the figures of 88% and 53%. The ADCCTO clarified that the 88% was in relation to the care plans for care leavers but the service was striving for 100% and the 53% related to the auditing of these plans which were of a good standard. This indicated the rest of the plans needed a good plan as current plans may not be specific enough and social workers would be improving these to ensure quality. Councillor Collins went on to ask if the plans were put together by social workers themselves. These care plans were put together by social workers working together with children.

Councillor Redsell said that training was good but social workers needed the experience. She continued on to ask how many children did the service aim to get back to their families. She hoped for some good outcomes on cases.

Regarding return interviews for missing children, the Vice-Chair asked why interviews were offered instead of being given. The ADCCTO explained that it was a legal requirement to offer a return interview. If taken up, the service would use an independent company such as Open Door, since children did not always want to speak to their social worker. An interview could not be forced upon children as most were not happy to talk. The Vice-Chair went on to say that if the target was to achieve 100%, then interviews should be given. The Chair added the question of what the service was doing to encourage children to have interviews. The ADCCTO said some children would not respond in interviews, particularly with 17 year olds who felt that they were almost adults and wanted independence. The Vice-Chair commented that it would not be possible to hit Ofsted's recommended target of 100% if the service was unable to compel children to respond.

The CER spoke of the recommendations to be agreed upon in the report and noted that some of the actions on the development plan were still amber and from 2015 / 16. She was concerned about recommendation 1.1 and asked what assurances could the service give to the Committee that the plan was moving forward. The ADCCTO explained that the plan was a live on and progressed as the service moved along. Some actions were still on the plan as they were still to be developed. The CER followed up by seeking clarification on whether the improvement and development plan were combined to which the ADCCTO confirmed it was.

Councillor Redsell asked what the placement home did when the children went missing. She also referred to recommendation 1.1 and agreeing with the CER, she expressed concern on whether the development plan actions would be completed or not. Councillor Spillman added that the document had not been readable on the agenda and it would be difficult to agree the recommendations.

The Committee were not satisfied on recommendations 1.1 and 1.2 and the ADCCTO accepted that the Committee did not have enough time to digest the plan due to the format. Therefore, she was happy to bring the plan back to the

Committee in the next meeting in the new municipal year. The Vice-Chair mentioned that recommendation 1.1 was for consideration and suggested that 1.2 could be amended to be agreed on.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the progress and direction of travel for children's social care in completing the required actions from the Development Plan.**
- 1.2 That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted that the Development Plan but considered it needed to come back to the Committee in the future.**

85. Children's Social Care Performance

The ADCCTO introduced the report which highlighted the level of demand placed on Thurrock's statutory social care service for children. Demand had been managed by the service through early intervention which had reduced the number of children being placed on a child protection plan.

The data in the report also showed:

- Thurrock was closing more looked after children cases than its comparator group.
- Looked after children were placed well in stable placements with 64% of looked after children under 16 in the same placement for more than 2 years which provided long term stability.
- Significant improvements had been made in placing children within Thurrock at 42% which was 10% higher than the previous year.
- 11 children had been forecasted to be adopted by the end of the financial year.
- Housing remained a key challenge for young care leavers but the Head Start Housing Programme would address this to ensure support was offered to ensure a supported transition into independent living.

From the summary provided within the report, Thurrock was still forecasted to perform better than the east of England average and they were one of the best performing authorities to complete its assessments within a timescale.

Pointing to paragraph 3.29, the Chair queried when the report would be expected. The ADCCTO explained that the deep dive study was currently being carried out. The Lead was pulling the report together and analysing it which would be brought to the LSCB before going to Corporate Parenting Committee.

Referring to paragraph 3.31, the CER asked when the Committee would expect to see the service's self-evaluation report. This would be prepared in

April and shared with the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee afterwards.

Councillor Spillman brought up some cases he had in housing and mentioned about the lack of supervision with young care leavers who had been left in debt arrears. He questioned how this would be fixed. Regarding intentionally homeless families, the ADCCTO explained that children's social care supported them through paying rents but the issue was a home for children to live in. The service supported the family by finding a home the family could afford to live in but there was an expectation that the family also looked for suitable accommodation. The service did work with the housing department to find homes for these families as well. Councillor Spillman continued by saying that there needed to be bespoke solutions to individual circumstances and a framework in place to support families. A framework and policy should be in place for every social worker to follow.

The IADLIS added that the service had worked hard with young care leavers to ensure they managed finances well and there were programmes to help them. She said the service worked well with the housing department, particularly in regards to the houses of multiple occupancy (HMOs) scheme which was doing well. Councillor Spillman felt the after care service had not worked well as young people had fallen into rent arrears.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the areas of improvement in children's social care, work undertaken to manage demand for statutory social care services and highlight areas of further investigation for deep dive studies.**
- 1.2 That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted a new inspection framework had been introduced by Ofsted for children's social care.**

86. Children Missing Education

The Strategic Lead Inclusion and Principal Educational Psychologist (SLIPEP), Malcolm Taylor, gave an overview of the current situation with children missing education and what processes were in place to ensure children in Thurrock had access to suitable education despite their circumstances.

Children missing education was defined as children of a compulsory school age but was not at school. This did not include children who were electively home educated or children in pupil referral units. The service had a duty to ensure children were receiving appropriate education so tuition packages were offered. Cases of children missing education were reviewed on a risk based model through monthly meetings. In some cases following a review, these would be escalated for further formal action.

At 9.17pm, Members agreed to suspend standing orders for 15 minutes to enable all items on the agenda to be heard.

Councillor Redsell commented that she had recently heard Treetops Special School would be receiving 120 more pupils. She went on to ask why the Council only visited home taught children once a year. The SLIPEP's response was that Treetops Special School had freeschool applications and additional applications were accepted as needed. The service would look at road access to ensure disruption was kept to a minimum. In regards to elective home education, the SLIPEP said the guidance was to not overstep as parents had chosen home education. Initial monitoring was in place to identify any safeguarding actions. He went on to say that a new governmental guidance may be developed and that Thurrock currently had a more intense monitoring system than other Local Authorities. The service did advise schools not to suggest elective home education but some parents chose this as their child did not get their choice of school.

RESOLVED:

1.1 That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered and provided comment on the current arrangements for monitoring children missing education and the processes in place to ensure all children had access to an appropriate education.

87. SEND Peer Review Action Plan and Progress Update

The report was presented by the SLIPEP which gave an update to the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) action plan that had been brought to the Committee in October 2017. Since then, progress had been good with 6 out of 11 key areas complete, 3 that were on track and 2 requiring additional support to ensure the appropriate impact.

Within the report, it included the progress of the transfer of Statements of SEN which Local Authorities were obligated to review and transfer these to an Education Health and Care Plan under new SEND arrangements set out in the Children and Families Act 2014. Thurrock Council had begun with 1011 statements and 909 had been completed so far. The deadline to complete the transfer was 31st March 2018 so the service was making good progress.

The Chair questioned how confident the service was in completing the statement transfers by the deadline. The SLIPEP said 76 statements now remained and the service was confident that the vast majority would be addressed. He was aware that some might not be finalised if parents wanted the plans to be changed. The Chair went on to ask how the introduction of the Education Health and Care Plans had occurred. The SLIPEP explained that this had been a national issue and within the SEND reforms set out in the Children and Families Act 2014, it had extended from statements that were primarily 5 – 16 years old but had increased to the age group of 0 – 25 years

due to a rise in demand and expectation from parents. This demand was occurring on a national level and not just in Thurrock.

RESOLVED:

1.1 That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the progress made on the SEND Peer Review Action Plan and the Transfer of Statements to Education Health and Care Plans.

88. Work Programme

The Committee acknowledged that the meeting was the last one of the current municipal year.

As mentioned earlier in the meeting by the Vice-Chair, a report on monitoring students searches in schools particularly in relation to searches on suicide methods, would be added to the work programme for the next municipal year.

The meeting finished at 9.35 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