

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 3 July 2018 at 7.00 pm

Present:	Councillors John Kent (Chair), David Potter (Vice-Chair), Alex Anderson and Bukky Okunade Nicola Cranch, Parent Governor
Apologies:	Councillors Garry Hague, Kim James, HealthWatch Thurrock Lynda Pritchard, Church of England Representative
In attendance:	Rory Patterson, Corporate Director of Children's Services Michele Lucas, Interim Assistant Director Learning Inclusion and Skills Patrick Kielty, Participation 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.

1. Apologies

Apologies were given by:

- Councillor Hague – Councillor Redsell was substituting in his place.
- Kim James, HealthWatch Thurrock
- Lynda Pritchard, Church of England Representative
- Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director of Children's Care and Targeted Outcomes

The Chair took the opportunity to welcome the new Parent Governor Representative, Nicola Cranch and newly elected Councillor Alex Anderson, to the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee. He went on to state what issues he wished to be discussed in future meetings that included:

- The outcome of a whistleblowing complaint received in January 2018.
- Free schools programme – the Committee had no input in this and should have had equal say as it was going to Cabinet for decision next week.
- School standards.
- Plans of two of the schools in Ockendon which were not on the Forward Plan.
- Youth violence and struggles and the actions of the Youth Offending Services should be scrutinised.

2. Minutes

Members pointed out the name of 'Jack Lumley' in the Minutes section of the previous minutes should be 'Jack Lobby'.

The minutes for the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 13 February 2018 were approved.

3. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

4. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interests.

5. Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board

There were no items raised by the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board.

6. Youth Work Presentation

A presentation of the Youth Work Team was given by the Officer, Patrick Kiely. The Youth Work Team consisted of youth workers and youth support workers who were part of the Youth & Outdoor Education Team and within Inspire. They ran clubs and activities across Thurrock for young people aged 11 – 19 years of age. There was no statutory duty to do so and the idea was to support the personal and social development of young people. The Youth Work Team sought funding for projects from a number of sources which included the police commission.

Recently established projects included:

- Tilbury Youth Club;
- Ockendon Youth Club which had gotten busier with a recent number of 70 young people attending;
- Street Football which was very popular with the World Cup 2018 currently being on; and
- #USound which was a music studio based in Grays.

The Youth Work Team benefitted young people as being involved helped to boost their confidence, improve their peer relationships and improve social skills.

The Parent Governor Representative asked whether the Youth Work Team had any young carers. The Officer answered that there was none but the

Youth Work Team worked closely with young carers who were also able to access the Youth Work Team's mainstream projects.

Councillor Okunade questioned how young people would be able to get involved with the Youth Work Team. The Officer replied that it was mainly through word of mouth and social workers would refer the Youth Work Team to young people. There was a growing presence of the Youth Work Team through online social media and the team would also walk around Thurrock to see where clubs were needed. Councillor Okunade referred to the recent 70 attendees in Ockendon Youth Club and asked if the club would have coped had there been more than 70. The Officer confirmed they would have coped but there was not always 70 attending every week. The average was 20 – 30. He went on to say that the Tilbury Youth Club was also looking to add on an extra night and that they had never had to turn away anyone.

Referring back to Councillor Okunade's earlier question, the Chair sought clarification on whether it was the Youth Cabinet or the Council that advertised the youth clubs and activities. He also wished to know the number of followers the team had on social media. The Officer confirmed the youth clubs and activities were on the Council's website and advertised through other mechanisms. There were just under 1000 followers on Twitter but word of mouth worked best. He believed social media applications such as Snapchat and Instagram may need to be used as most young people tended to use those.

The Committee further discussed how the Youth Cabinet reached out to disaffected young people. Some of the disaffected young people were reached through schools but when a youth club opened in the area, most of them would join. There had been a lot of work done by the Youth Cabinet on ways to reach disaffected young people. However, it was best to give Inspire a chance to grow further. A lot of funding had also been sought through Inspire but the Youth Cabinet would continue to look at other options. The Committee also discussed the Youth Work Team and Youth Offending Services working together in which the Youth Offending Services would give presentations with powerful images on issues such as gang crime.

The Chair thanked the Officer for the presentation and went on to say how proud he was of what the Youth Work Team did for Thurrock's young people. He also commented that out of the 95% of the money the government spent on youth services on the National Citizen scheme, only 12% of eligible youths received this. He believed the money would be better spent if it was devolved down to local government who would know where the young people were and how it could be spent locally.

7. Children's Social Care Development Plan

The Corporate Director of Children's Services, Rory Patterson, presented the report which provided an update to the revised Children's Social Care Development Plan 2018 – 19. In March 2016, Thurrock had been rated by

Ofsted to 'Require Improvement' which was how the Development Plan came to be. It was based on eight priority action areas for the service.

The plan was progressing effectively and was adjusted where needed to ensure the plan would remain on track. Some improvements included recruitment and retention which provided for a more stable workforce that was positive and committed to Thurrock. Challenges such as inconsistency in social work practice were being resolved with Signs of Safety training and were being rolled out to all staff. The aim was to provide a more consistent framework of intervention and improve assessment quality. To improve the service, the team looked closely at data and audited cases on a monthly basis. Feedback from social care workers were also taken into consideration.

The Development Board had been meeting on a monthly basis and continued to do so to ensure that recommendations and areas of improvement were implemented.

Councillor Redsell sought clarification on how quickly children (who were taken into emergency crisis situations) were reunited with their families. The Corporate Director replied that the service worked with the families to resolve issues and also looked at the extended family members to see who was able to look after the child. This helped to reduce the number of children coming into care. How quickly children went back to their families depended on the rehabilitation of the parents. Councillor Redsell went on to query the number of 60 agency staff back in May 2018 which had now been reduced to 39. The Corporate Director gave reassurances that this was due to the steady recruitment of permanent staff due to the popular AYSE scheme. It needed additional work as newly qualified social workers were unable to hold a big amount of casework at once.

Referring to foster care placements, Councillor Okunade felt the timescale of 8 months was too long and asked whether there was a process to fast track this. There was a risk in losing foster carers as they would turn to private placements as it was quicker. Agreeing with this, the Corporate Director stated the service looked at appropriate ways to speed up the process but the important checks still needed to be completed. Adding to this, Councillor Anderson sought clarification on the types of checks to ensure foster carers were of standard. The Corporate Director confirmed this was through regulations, checks and through the fostering panel which the service had oversight of.

Referring to the report, the Parent Governor Representative stated seeing no weaknesses reported. She asked where the trouble spots were and what the Committee could do to help. The Corporate Director mentioned quality, practises, assurances and recruitment of permanent staff being the weaknesses. To overcome quality assurance, the service looked at data and had set up workshops to raise standards. Staff were supported through good management and through quality audits, it helped the service to identify which areas needed improvement.

Pointing out the low number of children suitable for adoption, the Vice Chair queried the amount as he had thought it would be more in the 50's. The Corporate Director answered the average amount was 20 and agreed that the service was underperforming in this area. There were fewer young children who were easier to adopt and look after but the service was confident the number would increase to 15. Potential adopters were also reluctant to adopt as birth parents were able to appeal at any point of the process until adoption.

The Committee further discussed the process of adoption and the timescale which was dependent on the complexity of the case. Children in foster care were not always considered for adoption and this was the reason for an in-house team to look into this although the main focus was the timescale for adoption. The Chair voiced his disappointment that this had not been brought forward since 2015. The Committee went on to comment on the 7 children suitable for adoption which some Members felt needed more context on why they were suitable. The Parent Governor also felt it would be useful to have the figures of the number of available adopting parents.

Going through the report, the Chair sought clarification from the Corporate Director on a range of issues. He also stated that a copy of the self-evaluation from the service would have been useful and that the data provided should be correct at the time of the agenda's publication. The Corporate Director gave assurances that the average caseload per social worker was 18 – 20 which had been the same amount at the time of the Ofsted inspection. He went on to confirm that:

- There were no unallocated child protection cases.
- The service was actively recruiting in to unfilled staff posts.
- Data was analysed through monthly meetings and soon, regular meetings with managers to ensure they were able to use that data correctly to improve the service.
- Quality assurance checks would show the accurate use of data.

Discussing further on the use of data, the Committee sought reassurance on the accuracy of gathered data as it could be quite impersonal. Data was uploaded by social workers and gathered by another team. Where any information was incorrectly input, the data team would cleanse it and work with social workers and administrative staff to correct this. The Corporate Director reassured the Committee that the data was looked at alongside quality audits and feedback loops so the service did not rely on just data alone.

The Committee was unable to agree on all the recommendations of the report as not all the Members had seen the Development Plan. The Chair requested that a hard copy be made available to the Committee.

RESOLVED:

1.1 That the Children's 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.

UNRESOLVED:

1.2 That the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee received assurance that the Development Plan will deliver the required improvements.

8. Children's Social Care Performance

The report provided an update to the children's social care service where considerable work had been undertaken to manage the high level of demand experienced in Thurrock. A reduction had been seen in the number of contacts and referrals through the service's improved early intervention service and management of MASH.

In regards to looked after children, Thurrock was closing more cases than its comparator group but the rate of new looked after children were still higher. The service continued to monitor all new looked after children and that they were only being looked after where necessary. For missing looked after children, a reduction could be seen when compared from 2017 / 18 – 291 and 2016 / 17 – 361.

Housing continued to be a key challenge for young people leaving care and this was addressed with the Head Start Housing scheme. This provided support to help young care leavers to manage finances and to find suitable accommodation.

Through the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework, Thurrock had completed their self-evaluation which had been shared with Ofsted as required. An Ofsted focused visit was expected before the end of 2018.

Referring to the number given in contacts and referrals, Councillor Okunade asked the reason for the reduction which could help to identify how the service was doing well. The Corporate Director believed it may have been due to the restructuring of the prevention service that could have had some impact but he was unable to confirm as there were always variations in contacts and referrals. The service's multi-agency servicing hub (MASH) may have added to it as well. Councillor Okunade went on to query the number of unaccompanied asylum seekers to which the Corporate Director said that there was a still a flow coming in from the Tilbury Port. However, the service was in discussions with the Eastern regions to ensure the numbers coming in were spread out evenly and in line with protocols.

On missing children, Councillor Redsell wished to know more details on why and where children went missing. The Corporate Director offered to present a further report in a future meeting if this would help. He went on to say all

missing children eventually came back although some would go missing often which tended to be the teenagers. There was concern for all missing children but more so on younger children and each case was assessed differently. Echoing Councillor Redsell, the Parent Governor Representative added that the statistics given in the report had no heart and soul, there needed to be details to give sincerity to the report.

Referring to MASH, the Chair queried it being described as the front door and how effective MASH was. The Corporate Director confirmed it was common usage in the sector but was happy to reconsider the term. Through peer and external reviews, MASH had proven to be working effectively but the service remained vigilant. The Corporate Director offered the Committee the opportunity to look at MASH.

Going through the report, the Chair sought clarification on a range of issues. He also mentioned the inconsistency of the chart diagrams and asked for more consistency on those. The Corporate Director gave assurances and confirmed that:

- The threshold levels for referrals had not increased as the service had not seen data suggesting that was happening but the service remained vigilant.
- As a Director, he would delve into a random case on a weekly basis although the service would say it was too often.
- The level of repeat referrals would be maintained as it was a key performance area for the service.
- To achieve the target in looked after children; the service was looking at the recruitment of in-house carers. The indicator showed the service was doing well and there was more potential in Thurrock.
- The furthest placement for a child was currently in the North, a few 100 miles away, due to specialist concerns.
- The service worked with the Independent Reviewing Officer Service to address the looked after children reviews percentage which was not good with its percentage being lower than 95%.
- Appropriate decisions were made when it came to children on a child protection plan. The service was careful not to take children off too quickly as it would only result in them being re-registered and this would increase the number.

On care leavers, the Chair asked what needed to be done to bring the percentage up. The Officer, Michele Lucas, answered that there were a number of plans in place for care leavers which ensured their progression pathways. There was a core group of young people who dipped in and out of employment and the service looked to help them to sustain their employment. However, young people did not always communicate with the service. Ideally, the service wanted to achieve 70% for care leavers in education, training and employment as opposed to the current 61.5% and there were fantastic members of staff who were in regular contact with their young people. The Officer asked the Committee to consider helping young people in this area.

The Chair queried the different sets of data provided in paragraphs 3.22 and 3.23. It was difficult for the Committee to understand that data when it was inconsistent. The Officer answered that data moved when pulled at different times. The service was committed to the Head Start Housing Programme which would help to address the number of care leavers in unsuitable accommodation.

Councillor Redsell mentioned that children were not taught how to manage finances in school and referred to last year's Democracy Week run by the Youth Cabinet, where young people had brought the issue up. The Chair asked if there were any examples of schools teaching children to manage finances. The Officer was unable to confirm but would speak with colleagues to find out which schools taught managing finances.

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.

9. Work Programme

Members requested the following reports to be brought to the 9 October 2018 meeting:

- Outcome of whistleblowing complaint; and
- Report from the Youth Offending Service.

Further reports requested by Members to be brought to the 4 December 2018 meeting:

- School Standards.

A report on Reach 2 was also requested by Members for a future meeting.

The meeting finished at 8.52 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**