

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 8 October 2019 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Bukky Okunade (Chair), Jennifer Smith (Vice-Chair), Abbie Akinbohun, Alex Anderson and Elizabeth Rigby

Apologies: Councillor Garry Hague
Lynda Pritchard, Church of England Representative

In attendance: Nicola Cranch, Parent Governor Representative
Paula Robinson, Parent Governor Representative
Adam Shea, Youth Cabinet Representative
Alicia Jones, Youth Cabinet Representative
Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health/Interim Director of Children's Services
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills
Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director of Children's Services
Joseph Tynan, Strategic Lead for Child in Need and Child Protection and Principal Social Worker for Children's Social Care
Alan Cotgrove, Chair Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership
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.

14. Minutes

The minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 2 July 2019 was approved as a true and correct record.

The minutes of the Extraordinary Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 25 July 2019 was approved as a true and correct record.

15. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

16. Declaration of Interests

The Vice-Chair declared a non-pecuniary interest in that she worked at a school and worked with SEND children.

17. Youth Cabinet Update

An update was given by the Youth Cabinet Representatives which included:

- A £3,000 donation from the police to raise awareness on knife crime;
- The annual Youth Conference which was a forum for young people to discuss and raise awareness of important issues;
- Working with the School Wellbeing Service to raise awareness of mental wellbeing within schools and how young people can get involved with the Youth Cabinet.

The Chair congratulated the Youth Cabinet on the £3,000 donation received and queried how the donation would be utilised. The Youth Cabinet Representatives replied that the idea was to invite speakers from relevant organisations into schools to discuss and raise the seriousness of knife crime as the Youth Cabinet felt this would provide a more effective message to young people.

18. 2018/19 Annual Complaints and Representations Report - Children's Social Care

The report was introduced by Sheila Murphy and set out the number of representations and complaints including the key issues and learning from complaints covering the period 1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019.

Referring to the communication learning of phone calls on page 29, the Chair questioned how phone calls were reviewed and how effective it was. Joe Tynan explained that reviewing phone calls was part of the learning process and phone rings were also monitored. If a phone call was not picked up after three rings, this would be flagged that the call was not answered in a timely manner and escalated to managers.

On routine case audits on page 30, the Chair asked if cases were selected at random. Sheila Murphy answered that a monthly auditing process was undertaken in which 25 cases were audited according to a template to ensure cases were fit for purpose and grammatically correct. A workshop had been setup 18 months ago and took place every Thursday morning which revolved around learning from those cases and themes usually ran in the workshop for two weeks before another theme was headlined.

RESOLVED:

That the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered and noted the report.

19. Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Partnership - Performance Report May - August 2019

Presented by Alan Cotgrove, the report reminded the Committee of the changes made following the legislation to the Children and Social Work Act 2017 and Working Together 2018 statutory guidance. The report covered the

first performance period of May – August 2019 since the Partnership’s transition to the arrangements on 7 May 2019. Future reports would be based on a quarterly period in line with the standard business year of 1 April – 31 March. The challenge was how the impact of the LSCP could be measured.

Regarding the safeguarding events, the Chair questioned whether the events would continue throughout the year. Alan Cotgrove confirmed that the events would continue to run and the challenge lay in the attendance rates as the LSCP tried to encourage parents to attend through engagement opportunities such as parents evenings or school open evenings.

Mentioning the LSCP’s recent roadshow, Nicola Cranch said she had attended but pointed out the poor timing of the roadshow as it had taken place during school half-term. She suggested a crèche facility for parents with young children. Regarding most of the LSCP targets, she noted these were to reduce numbers which did not seem realistic.

Alan Cotgrove explained that LSCP events were held at varying times throughout the year and some requests were for events during the school term breaks. He went on to say that the LSCP objectives and targets would be looked at again.

Councillor Anderson queried how the LSCP aimed to interact with the Youth Cabinet as was outlined on page 61. Alan Cotgrove said that a meeting was in place to meet with the Youth Cabinet to discuss a delivery plan and further meetings had been set up throughout the year.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 The Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the 2019-2020 Local Safeguarding Children Partnership Delivery Plan.**
- 1.2 The Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered and provided comment on the performance of the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership.**

20. Education Support Strategy O&S Report Oct 2019

The report was presented by Michele Lucas, which highlighted the change to the educational landscape across Thurrock over the last five years. Most schools have joined Multiple Academy Trusts (MATs) or become standalone academies. The Education Support Strategy was developed in partnerships with Thurrock’s schools which sets out how Thurrock planned to further embed their partnership-working ethos to ensure that children and young people had access to educational provision with a well-rounded and balanced curriculum.

Thurrock had undergone some significant changes and had realigned some of their services to the schools in the borough to meet the changing demand and

to build strong relationships. The Education Support Strategy aims to provide support from Thurrock and the key priorities included:

1. Attainment
2. Capacity
3. Inclusion
4. Employability and Skills
5. Wellbeing and Safety
6. Rigour and Partnership

Nicola Cranch said that Parent Governors were part of Academy Schools and she questioned how the service planned to gain the support of Parent Governors for the Education Support Strategy. Michele Lucas replied that Thurrock was proud of all the schools in the borough and understood that each school had its own priorities and this differed to another school. Thurrock had some strong stand alone academies and the service supported them but the one thing everyone had in common was the shared goal to ensure all pupils had the best start in education and continued throughout their time in education.

Following up, Paula Robinson asked about the service acquiring the support of standalone academies for the Education Support Strategy. Michele Lucas reiterated that the common goal was to ensure all children received the best education in Thurrock and that all schools in Thurrock were excellent whether they were standalone academies or part of a MAT.

Adding on, Roger Harris said that the service had recently met with the Chief Executives of MATs and although there was competition, there was also an underlying strong desire to work with Thurrock on a number of topics including the Free School Programme and on transport. Today's education landscape was a different environment to what it had been five years ago when schools were council run but there was still the principle of working in partnerships to achieve the best outcomes.

Referring to page 77, the Chair questioned the category mentioned in bullet point four. Michele Lucas replied that the category was Ofsted and would amend the draft.

The Chair questioned whether performance data between schools were shared and how this was done. She went on to ask if the service encountered resistance from schools when forming partnerships. Regarding data, Michele Lucas said this was reported nationally and available for everyone to view. In Thurrock, there was an understanding of how data was shared even where there was potentially competition between schools. The service would send out data sheets once acquired from schools and annual meetings were held with schools. In some Local Authorities (LAs), some schools had found the new safeguarding criteria set out by Ofsted to be challenging so Thurrock had learned from this and set up training for schools in Thurrock to attend to help them understand the new safeguarding criteria.

For Thurrock children attending schools outside the borough, the Chair questioned if they were included in the Education Support Strategy and if this fell under the Virtual School. Michele Lucas explained that the Virtual School supported all children that attended Thurrock's schools. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) children attending out of borough schools were monitored and Thurrock was still responsible for them. This also included the children who chose to attend schools outside of Thurrock as well as Looked After Children (LAC).

Councillor Rigby questioned whether newly built schools would be set up as an academy. Michele Lucas confirmed that this would be the case.

Referring to bullet point 8 on page 77, Paula Robinson asked if it was from the age of 14 years old that a young person could attend technical college. In response, Michele Lucas confirmed this was the case but it was not easy to access because the challenge lay in the curriculum and there was a lot of work involved in T Levels. For 14-19 year olds, there were vocational pathways and the service was looking into this. There were also a number of schools that had developed vocational pathways.

Councillor Akinbohun asked whether there was still young people that were not in education in the borough. Michele Lucas stated that the service was proud to say that there were not many young people that were not in some form of training or education in Thurrock. The figure stood around 1.8% which equated to about 140 young people in that age range (following on from this meeting, Michele Lucas confirmed that the most recent figure was 2.1% in August 2019 and this equated to 77 16-17 year olds and that the 140 figure included 18 year olds). There were varying reasons why a young person may not be in education or training. In the eastern England region, Thurrock's figures were positive in the Not in Employment, Education and Training (NEET) figures and Thurrock had worked hard to achieve their targets.

Following up, Councillor Akinbohun queried the improvement percentage from last year's NEET figures to this year's figures. Michele Lucas answered that she would send the required data to the Committee.

Regarding year 6 pupils' mental and physical health, Paula Robinson questioned how the service intended to ensure schools had the right targets and services to support this. Michele Lucas replied that the service had invested almost £1 million into the new School Wellbeing Service which would be launching next week. This would enable the service to work closely with schools on the wellbeing of pupils and an update would be brought to the next committee meeting.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed and offered feedback on the Education Support Strategy**

1.2 That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommended to Cabinet the key priorities set out in the Education Support Strategy to support schools across Thurrock.

21. Written Statement of Actions Progress Review - Verbal Update

Michele Lucas informed the Committee that the WSoA had been submitted to Ofsted over the summer but Ofsted's response had been that the WSoA required more detail. The service had met with the Chair and Vice-Chair and had actioned the recommendations given which had since been resubmitted to Ofsted. The service hoped for feedback from Ofsted by December.

The Committee was satisfied with the update given.

22. Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report

The report was introduced by Sheila Murphy and covered the period of 1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019. The role of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) was to ensure that LAC received the best quality care from the LA, that LAC's needs were met and IROs held the LA to account. During the reporting period, the IRO service had remained stable with one change in personnel due to retirement and with the continued number of five permanent IROs. A total of 755 caseload reviews had been undertaken which was an increase from the previous year and 93% had been held within timescale, also an improvement from the year before.

Referring to paragraph three on page 118, Paula Robinson questioned if there were underlying reasons as to why the percentage of LAC from Black/Black British backgrounds had remained unchanged over the years and was still higher than the total population. Sheila Murphy explained that data was always analysed on factors such as a child's age and ethnicity. The service had noticed that the number of Black/Black British LAC was slightly higher than Thurrock's Black/Black British children population and would be aiming to undertake a deep dive study to analyse who the LAC were, if they were appropriately looked after and whether enough support was given to them before they had come into the service's care. Work was being undertaken with the service's Edge of Care Team on the availability of support. She went on to say that the figure of LAC from Black/Black British background could also be affected by the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) in the service's care as there was usually a higher proportion of UASC in care in Thurrock.

On UASC, Paula Robinson said that with safeguarding concerns, there needed to be a shared understanding of what a good parent was and for some cultures, the idea of a good parent might be different. She went on to question if there was work undertaken in this area regarding this. In response, Sheila Murphy said that there had been issues of physical abuse/chastisement which occurred in some cultures and some children may have attended school with severe injuries where an emerging pattern was seen which was then flagged up with the service. A programme for parents by

a voluntary organisation had been set up to improve understanding on what was acceptable and what was not in terms of discipline in western culture which had proved helpful for some parents.

Paula Robinson questioned what support services were in place to support the children themselves and if there was a pathway that enabled them to seek help. Sheila Murphy explained these types of issues with children were usually brought to the service's attention through schools. A children's group was also run with Thurrock's commissioned services.

Noting the one change with the IROs, Councillor Anderson commented that the trust with an IRO was important so stability was of the utmost importance. He asked how the service would ensure that the stability of the IRO service would continue when recruiting to vacant posts. In response, Sheila Murphy stated that the IROs were paid at a competitive rate and was offered many training opportunities. The IROs in Thurrock had stayed with the service for a considerable period. Recent recruitment had been very positive with keen interest in these roles both internally and externally.

The Chair sought more detail on the Mind of My Own app mentioned in the report. Sheila Murphy explained that the app was used by children and young people to communicate with their assigned social worker, IROs and manager. There were numbers provided for the young people to report their feelings to and younger children had emojis to send through to explain how they felt. The social workers were encouraged to use the app and the app makers sent data over that detailed the number of usages of the app. This helped the service to understand the feelings of children and young people and what other support could be offered.

Alicia Jones questioned whether the app had been rolled out elsewhere and who to. Sheila Murphy answered that the app had been rolled out to the service's LAC and the app was used by other LAs but the app makers had informed the service that Thurrock had made the most of the app and had really embraced it. All new staff were taught how to use the app and encouraged to use it.

RESOLVED:

That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the IRO Annual Report 2018-19 and the recommendations in the report.

23. Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) Annual Report 2018-19

Presented by Sheila Murphy, the report provided an update on the work of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) who oversaw the effectiveness of the process of allegations against professionals in a position of trust. As part of the Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 statutory guidance, all agencies that provide services for children were required to have an allegation procedure in place. The report outlined the process for managing allegations

in Thurrock taking into consideration the three strands of an allegation and the possible outcomes from an allegation.

In Thurrock, the number of allegations made against a person in a position of trust had slightly reduced compared to the previous year and most allegations related to physical incidents where staff had used restraint to manage a situation. The timescale for the completion of a LADO role is usually within a month, although cases with police investigations may continue for several months.

Councillor Anderson questioned how the service raised awareness of the LADO process as he had not been aware of the process before. Sheila Murphy said that the service offered training sessions to schools, fostering services and health services on the LADO process. The Chair asked that a handout with more information on the LADO be sent out to the Committee via email.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the LADO annual report 2018-19 be noted.

24. Local Offer to Care Leavers

Introduced by Sheila Murphy, the report set out Thurrock's offer to its care leavers which included an allocated Personal Adviser, a pathway plan, safe accommodation, support with education, employment and training and a financial plan.

Referring to the special event mentioned on page 151, Councillor Anderson sought more detail on the feedback of the event. In response, Sheila Murphy said that the diagrams and drawings in the Thurrock Council's Guide for Young Adults Leaving Our Care in appendix 1 was the feedback from the young people who attended the event. These had been agreed by the young people to include in the guide.

Roger Harris mentioned that the report had also been brought to the Corporate Parenting committee and that some of the care leavers had been invited to attend and had been vocal in their feedback.

The Chair noted that the offer was a contract between Thurrock's care leavers and Thurrock Council and asked that the service ensure this was seen through to the end to which was agreed.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee was informed about Thurrock's Local Offer to Care Leavers.

25. Children's Social Care Performance Report

The report was introduced by Joseph Tynan who referred to the Committee meeting on 2 July 2019 where concerns had been subsequently raised around the missing children data given in the Children's Social Care Performance Report at that time. He gave reassurance to the Committee that high level data was discussed monthly in pre-arranged meetings that was chaired by Sheila Murphy and there was also another monthly data meeting that was chaired by Roger Harris.

The report showed good performance in the service that included high levels of referrals continued on from the previous year, improvement in children and families assessments being completed within the 45 day timescale and a continued reduction in the number of UASC.

The Chair commented that social workers were doing a good job but performance was important and had to be accurate. She sought reassurance that the data provided was accurate. Roger Harris reassured the Committee that a deep dive study had been undertaken on the previous concerns of data and it was discovered that some of the previous year's data had been partly completed. The data now went through various checks and was signed off at senior level to ensure complete and accurate data.

Councillor Anderson commented that the issue of missing LAC had been on the performance report at Committee for over a year and was the first time that the data had been inaccurate. He thanked the service for their reassurance.

Councillor Akinbohun questioned why there was a reduction in the number of UASC. Joseph Tynan explained that data tended to fluctuate in UASC numbers and had done over the last few months. The factors for this could include geographical on where UASC were found or even different times of the year.

Adding to this, Sheila Murphy said the service was fortunate to have the eastern region protocol in place where neighbouring regions would accept some of the UASC arriving in Thurrock. Councillor Akinbohun sought reassurance that the service was not refusing UASC and sending them away. Joseph Tynan reassured the Committee that UASC were not turned away as the service had a duty to provide care for them.

26. Work Programme

The report High Level Apprenticeships was removed from the 3 December 2019 meeting as this report fell under the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee as a key performance indicator.

The report Alternative Pathways Provision was added to the 3 December 2019 meeting which would also be considered at Cabinet in February 2020.

The report Outcome of Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services may come in the form as a verbal update at the 3 December 2019 meeting if the inspection took place before that time.

The meeting finished at 8.47 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk**