

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 4 February 2020 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Bukky Okunade (Chair), Jennifer Smith (Vice-Chair), Abbie Akinbohun, Sara Muldowney, Elizabeth Rigby and Joycelyn Redsell (Substitute) (substitute for Alex Anderson)

Lynda Pritchard, Church of England Representative
Nicola Cranch, Parent Governor Representative

Apologies: Councillor Alex Anderson and Robinson, Parent Governor Representative

In attendance: Adam Shea, Youth Cabinet Member
Lucia Lucioni, Youth Cabinet Member
Alicia Jones, Youth Cabinet Representative
Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director of Children's Services
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills
Andrea Winstone, Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND
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.

27. Minutes

The minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 8 October 2019 were approved as a true and correct record.

28. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

29. Declaration of Interests

Lynda Pritchard, Church of England Representative, declared that she was working with the SEND Team in Thurrock.

Councillor Redsell declared that the SEND school, Treetops, was within her ward.

30. Youth Cabinet Update

Since the last Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Youth Cabinet had had two meetings. At the recent meeting, the Youth

Cabinet had been planning events and tasks for the year and had been considering how to promote the Youth Cabinet through the use of social media.

The Youth Cabinet had their annual conference back in December 2019 which had seen a turnout of 9 schools and 80 pupils where a number of issues had been discussed including drugs. Next month, the Youth Cabinet would be looking to hold their elections and would be looking for candidates in schools including Treetops to ensure a varied pool of candidates.

Nicola Cranch, Parent Governor Representative, queried whether the turnout of 9 schools were good. Lucia Lucioni, Youth Cabinet Member, answered that the turnout was good as 6 schools had been expected. However, the Youth Cabinet had the capacity to accommodate the extra guests. Councillor Redsell asked if the Youth Cabinet notified schools and what discussions had been held. Alicia Jones, Youth Cabinet Member, confirmed that invites were sent out to all secondary schools within the Borough and it was for the schools to confirm attendance. Adam Shea, Youth Cabinet Member, said there had been two discussions on feminism running simultaneously and other discussions had revolved around Brexit, drugs and the use of social media.

Councillor Redsell felt that Members should be invited to the Youth Cabinet Conference as well as meetings to offer support and questioned whether Members had been invited. Lucia Lucioni confirmed that Members were still invited and Members were also welcome to go to Youth Cabinet meetings. She went on to say that the Conference had included guest speakers on certain topics and that the Council had attended to speak to young people about apprenticeships.

The Chair commended the Youth Cabinet for their hard work and was pleased to see young people doing well in Thurrock. She asked that the Youth Cabinet continue to involve Members.

31. Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Partnership

This item was not heard as the Officer was unable to attend due to sickness.

32. Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS)

The report was presented by Sheila Murphy. The report outlined that the last inspection of 22 February to 16 March 2016, had been undertaken under Ofsted's previous Single Inspection Framework (SIF) and that the recent inspection of 4 to 22 November 2019 had been undertaken under the new Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) Framework. The outcome from the inspection showed that Thurrock Council was providing a 'Good' service that had been improved upon for vulnerable young people and in continuing to provide excellent services to vulnerable children and their families.

Referring to recommendation 1.2, the Chair asked that an additional recommendation revolving around a future update be added as she felt the Committee needed to learn more of the 3 areas of improvement mentioned. Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help, suggested that the additional recommendation as, "That the Committee have oversight of the refreshed development plan including the Ofsted areas of improvement, and that the development plan be presented to the Committee." The Committee agreed to this.

Lynda Pritchard praised the service for their hard work. She questioned whether the Committee could have sight of the development plan before the next Committee meeting in the new municipal year. Sheila Murphy answered that a development plan had been in place prior to the Ofsted inspection but had been refreshed since then. An update of the actions and timescale for outcomes would be brought to the next meeting. The Chair asked that an update be provided via email before the next meeting.

Nicola Cranch also gave praise to the service and thought the Ofsted comments provided within the report were positive. Councillor Muldowney echoed this praise and agreed that sight of the development plan before the next meeting would be good. Councillor Redsell was pleased to see how much the service had changed over the years and congratulated the service on the Ofsted rating obtained.

Sheila Murphy mentioned that Ofsted had sent the service a young person friendly report and asked the Youth Cabinet how the service could make this publicly available in the best way possible to reach young people whether it would be through the Council's website or another pathway. Alicia Jones admitted that young people did not often look at the Council's website or the Council's social media channels. However, she felt that the Council's website was still the best method of communicating the report to young people as some may still look on the website.

The Committee further discussed pathways to reach out to young people through reaching out to schools, libraries and social media.

Referring back to the update of the development plan, Sheila Murphy said the draft of this could be sent out to the Committee in March 2020 and then again before the next meeting in the new municipal year should the Committee membership change.

Councillor Rigby asked how the achieved Ofsted rating compared to the last inspection rating. Sheila Murphy explained that the last inspection had been based on the SIF and had received a 'Requires Improvement' rating but this inspection under the ILACS framework, had achieved a 'Good' rating.

Councillor Muldowney questioned if the two frameworks were comparable. Sheila Murphy explained that they were not as each framework differed. The ILACS Framework was a process of inspections and looked at services

through the 'lens of a child' and was less interested in speaking with officers. It looked at the impact of services and asked for evidence of this impact.

The Chair questioned when the next inspection was expected to take place. Sheila Murphy replied that a focused visit was expected in a year's time but may look into a specific area. The Council may even be subject to a Joint Area Targeted (JAT) inspection where an inspection could be undertaken at 6 Local Authorities at a time to look at a specific theme running. This theme currently revolved around mental health in young people.

RESOLVED (with additional recommendation of 1.2):

- 1.1 That the Committee noted Thurrock's outcome from the Ofsted ILACS and offer their unanimous thanks to all officers and elected members of the council involved in achieving the Good rating.**
- 1.2 That the Committee have oversight of the refreshed development plan including the Ofsted areas of improvement, and that the development plan be presented to the Committee.**

33. SEND Inspection Outcome - Written Statement of Action Update

Presented by Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills, the report outlined that the Written Statement of Action (WSoA) plan had been approved by Ofsted on 8 October 2019 and that a re-inspection would take place 18 months from that date. Appendix 1 of the report highlighted the 3 key areas for improvement and their progresses in detail. As part of this, a significant training programme had been provided to staff who were now fully trained and a new telephone system had been implemented. There was no longer an answerphone system and calls were returned within timeframes given.

Councillor Muldowney noted that there had been a change in the Portfolio Holder for Education and sought clarification on the transition of this. Michele Lucas reassured the Committee that the service had met with the new Portfolio Holder for Education and would be holding further meetings.

Referring to appendix 1, Councillor Muldowney noted that some of the actions highlighted had already passed its targeted completion dates. She sought more detail on this. Michele Lucas explained that the action plan had been approved by Ofsted in October 2019 and that the actions had been completed to target but were left on the action plan to provide a snapshot of what actions had been undertaken.

Nicola Cranch was pleased to see the passion that officers had for their work. She went on to say that a common factor highlighted within the report was the staffing levels and stated the importance of retaining current staff to ensure the consistency of work. She asked what the service was doing to ensure that staff was retained. Michele Lucas explained that investment in staff was critical and that the service had looked into training current staff to improve

skills. Because of this, the service's recent recruitment round had been successful in recruiting a number of staff. She went on to say that she and other Senior Officers would walk around the office to engage with staff and support where possible.

Referring to the appendix of the report, Councillor Redsell noted that one of the SEND priorities were to prepare young people for adulthood and thought this would be hard to achieve as the service would not be able to see the outcome of this. Michele Lucas explained that this priority was an important part of the SEND key priorities and the critical work that the service undertook. She went on to say that the service worked closely with the Adult Social Care team in the Council and had developed a range of programmes through Joint Commissioning to ensure the best outcomes. She added that Education and Health Care (EHC) Plans continued until the age of 25 years old and would see the outcomes of a young person's transition into adulthood through these. The service ensured that there was a strong pathway of support for young people through this transition.

Regarding the new telephone system in place, Councillor Akinbohun asked whether there had been any feedback from users particularly elderly people. Andrea Winstone, Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND, replied that the system were monitored by the Customer Service team and that there had been a 46% reduction in calls which indicated that customers were happy. She went on to say that the service did not tend to liaise with elderly people but mainly children's parents or carers.

With the EHC plans, the Chair sought clarification on the number of completed plans. Andrea Winstone answered that last year, 52% of the plans had been completed within statutory timescales. This year, 76% EHC plans had been completed which was an improvement compared against the national standard by 16%. The services aim was to complete 100% of EHC plans to target which may be possible with the improvement in staffing capacity.

The Chair thought that 300 caseloads for one person seemed excessive and questioned this in comparison to other Boroughs. Andrea Winstone said that with the increased members of staff, the service would be aiming to reduce the caseload to 150 cases per case worker which was the optimum number suggested by Ofsted.

Councillor Redsell noted that the key responsible people highlighted within the appendix did not include corporate parents for looked after children. Michele Lucas recognised that there was a crossover of responsibility in that area and explained that the children within the report did not fall under the responsibility of a corporate parent.

The Chair sought clarification to recommendation 1.2. Michele Lucas explained that the Committee had previously agreed for future WSoA updates to be brought back to the Committee as a verbal update and asked whether the Committee still wished for a verbal update or more of a written report. The

Committee felt that a written update would be best with the relevant information within the remit of the Committee. This would help to inform officers for future meetings and additional wording was added to recommendation 1.2 to highlight this.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 O&S noted the updated WSoA and the work that has been undertaken to address the areas of weakness.**
- 1.2 O&S considered how they would like to be kept informed of progress relating to the WSoA to help inform Officers for future O&S meetings.**

34. Schools' Performance

Presented by Andrea Winstone, Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND, the report stated that most of Thurrock's children and young people in the early years and primary settings continued to achieve well and that a higher percentage of children at the end of year 6 achieved the age related expectations.

Councillor Muldowney was pleased to hear of the improvement in primary schools but was concerned to hear performance dropping in secondary schools in Thurrock. Andrea Winstone explained that the performance of schools this year was a different picture compared to last year. All schools were academies and the Local Authority had no power within an academy. However, the service had a good working relationship with the teaching schools and helped to identify where support could be sought to help lower attaining schools.

Councillor Redsell thought that schools should consider an officer to look into funding options. She went on to say that schools used to set up fundraising events such as fetes and should consider these. Andrea Winstone said that the service sometimes received grants notifications from a subscription to grants website and that these were sent onto schools. Schools that had an Ofsted rating of 'Requires Improvement' were in a better position to acquire the funds needed through the teaching schools and hubs. The Committee further discussed funding options for schools and how there was a lack of communication between schools. The Committee discussed the importance of schools communicating with each other and supporting each other.

Councillor Muldowney commented on the year on year funding cuts and questioned how these impacted upon schools in the Borough. Michele Lucas answered that the central government had invested money into supporting schools. There was a significant pressure on SEND services and this had been recognised which saw a significant increase in the Dedicated School Grants for Thurrock that had been approved by the Schools Forum. However, this pressure was common across all boroughs and not unique to Thurrock.

There was a challenge in obtaining the right staff and schools now had to be looked at as a business for education.

Lynda Pritchard commented that the performance of key stage 2 had been low in the past with key stage 4 performing well. She sought clarification on the change in performance levels. She also stated that schools needed more than just funding to improve performance, it was important to have the right staff with a passion for education. Andrea Winstone explained that the change was due to the investment into Early Years learning. This helped to prepare children going into primary schools who were ready to learn. She went on to say that recruitment for primary schools were easier and had a better retention rate for staff. It was harder to recruit secondary school teachers and there was a national shortage seen.

Councillor Rigby thought the issue of performance were more from a shortage of teachers rather than funding. She mentioned that the learning equipment for pupils used to be a notebook, pens and a good teacher. She felt that schools needed to look at ways to attract teachers and retain them. Adding to this, Councillor Akinbohun questioned the salary rate for teachers. Andrea Winstone explained that teachers were paid accordingly to the national pay structure for teachers. However, academy schools had their own pay structures and incentives to try to attract teachers and retain them.

Councillor Muldowney commented that many schools had become academies since 2012 and she was aware that some academies recruited unqualified teachers. She asked for more information and data on this and also sought more detail on the process of a school becoming an academy. Andrea Winstone answered that the information and data was publicly available on the Department for Education schools' performance website and that the data was held there, not with the Local Authority.

Regarding Councillor Muldowney's question on the process of a school becoming an academy, Michele Lucas said that as the academy programme had moved forward, some schools had struggled which had resulted in re-brokerage for some of them. If one reached a level of concern, then the solution had been to become an academy or part of a Multi Academy Trust (MAT). There was a system in place for failing schools and it was highlighted that schools that were performing well could choose to become an academy as well.

The Chair sought clarification on recommendation 1.2 and asked how the performance of schools were monitored. Andrea Winstone explained that schools were monitored at the end of the key stage where it was then identified how well each group had performed through published school performance data at the end of statutory returns.

The Chair questioned whether the performance data included SEND schools. Andrea Winstone confirmed that the data did not include SEND schools as not many SEND children undertook exams at the end of the key stages.

However, Treetops school may publish some GCSE results if any of the pupils sat their GCSEs.

The Chair sought a breakdown in the performance data given within the report. Andrea Winstone gave a breakdown of:

- 92% of primary schools with a good or better performance;
- 70% of secondary schools that were good or better;
- 84% of Thurrock's schools overall were good or better;
- primary schools were doing well;
- 1 secondary school had not undergone inspection yet; and
- A number of inspections were due for primary schools but had transitioned over to an academy so had no current inspection judgement yet.

The Chair questioned the availability of support to schools. Andrea Winstone explained that if a school received a 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' rating, support could be sought through the hub that sat within the responsibility of Harris Primary. Thurrock currently had 3 teaching schools who were the mechanism for delivering school improvement activity to schools requiring improvement. However, schools can choose where to acquire their school improvement activities from.

For low performing schools, Councillor Akinbohun questioned whether the role of the headteacher was looked at in regards to this. Andrea Winstone explained that the headteacher's role within a low performing school was for the school's governing board to decide. She went on to say that low performing schools were offered support and that schools that were performing well were recognised through letters of commendations.

The Committee discussed the recommendations and agreed that the future schools' performance reports be enhanced to include more detail on SEND learners along with case studies.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Children's Overview & Scrutiny noted the provisional outcomes of the summer 2019 tests and examinations and commends schools, pupils, and parents/carers on their achievements.**
- 1.2 That the Children's Overview & Scrutiny considered how they would like to review progress of learners with SEND in light of the Ofsted Written Statement of Action.**

35. Fees and Charges Pricing Strategy 2020/21

The report was presented by Michele Lucas. The report set out the charges in relation to the services within the remit of Children's Service Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The charges would take effect from 1 April 2020.

Referring to paragraph 4.2 of the report, Councillor Muldowney sought clarification on whether the delegated power to the Director had ever been used. Michele Lucas replied that she was not aware that this delegation had been used but was given in the event that charges required altering throughout the year in order to meet service demands and changes. Across Children's Services, there had not been any changes made with the exception of the Thurrock Adult Community College that had moved across into Children's Services.

The Committee discussed the music service available to schools that was funded by another organisation but provided across Thurrock. Comments highlighted the importance of music and arts education as some schools did not incorporate this into their curriculum.

The Committee discussed the facilities of Grangewater Outdoor Education Centre and concluded that it was not comparable to Stubbers Adventure Centre as Grangewater offered educational qualifications whereas Stubbers operated on a commercial principle. However, the Youth Cabinet had suggested that Grangewater could offer a Young Leaders Scheme to engage the young people community.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the revised fees and charges proposals including those no longer applicable.**
- 1.2 That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted that director delegated authority will be sought via Cabinet to allow Fees & Charges to be varied within a financial year in response to commercial requirements.**

36. Work Programme

The Chair thanked the Committee for their contribution in this municipal year and thanked officers for their work.

The following items were added to the next meeting of the municipal year:

- Ofsted Development Plan; and
- SEND Written Statement of Actions Update.

The meeting finished at 9.00 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