

Minutes of the Meeting of the Extraordinary Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 25 July 2019 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Bukky Okunade (Chair), Abbie Akinbohun, Alex Anderson, Elizabeth Rigby and David Potter (Substitute) (substitute for Jennifer Smith)

Nicola Cranch, Parent Governor Representative

Apologies: Councillors Jennifer Smith (Vice-Chair) and Garry Hague
Lynda Pritchard, Church of England Representative
Kim James, Health Watch
Paula Robinson, Parent Governor Representative

In attendance:

Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills
Malcolm Taylor, Strategic Lead for Specialist Provision and Principal Education Psychologist
Andrea Winstone, Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND
Kate Kozlova-Boran, Service Manager, Preparing for Adulthood
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.

11. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

12. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

13. SEND Inspection Outcome - Written Statement of Action

Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills, introduced the service's restructured management team that addressed the management issues Ofsted had identified. This team consisted of:

- Malcolm Taylor, Strategic Lead for Specialist Provision and Principal Education Psychologist – responsible for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP), access inclusion panels and centres.
- Andrea Winstone, Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND – looked after the operational SEND team.

- Kate Kozlova-Boran, Service Manager, Preparing for Adulthood – responsible for learners and post 16 provisions.

Continuing on, Michele Lucas outlined the draft Written Statement of Action (WSOA) that would be sent to Ofsted on 12 August. The draft WSOA was a result of the recent Ofsted inspection into the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) service that had identified 3 areas of weaknesses. The draft WSOA proposed how to improve in these 3 identified areas of weaknesses and Michele Lucas gave assurance to Members that the service would also continue to work and improve on other areas within the SEND service as well.

Going through appendix 1, Michele Lucas outlined in significant weakness area 1 that it related to record keeping for young people where plans was not updated regularly but the service were aware of the stage a young person was at.

The Chair suggested that Michele Lucas summarised each page of the appendix and then allow the Committee to ask questions due to depth of the detail in the appendix.

Nicola Cranch, Parent Governor Representative, queried whether the service felt Ofsted had given a fair assessment in their inspection. Michele Lucas answered that the service had been aware of some areas that needed development and the assessment Ofsted had given was a sample which was how the inspections worked. The service accepted the assessment and the plan now was to begin improvements to ensure a cohesive way of working within the service.

Pointing out the sentence on page 14, 'The system at any time can produce this information readily', the Chair noted that this had been one of failings of the service and asked what the improvement would be for this. Agreeing that systems had not worked as well as it should have, Michele Lucas said training on the systems for staff was in place. This training sought to teach staff how to use the systems efficiently to enable more accessibility.

Adding on, Andrea Winstone, said the systems had been in place for many years. A comprehensive training package had been compiled to ensure the system was updated at the same time as a change took place. The team was currently sifting through the process to ensure information was up to date so staff could make full use of the system.

Nicola Cranch queried whether the data was validated. Confirming this was the case, Andrea Winstone said that the SEND operational team pulled the data and presented it to the SEND Development Board for KPI reviews.

Going onto page 15 of the agenda, Michele Lucas outlined the detail on that page which related to management oversight. Nicola Cranch asked if yearly appraisals for the management team would include the targets of the WSOA. Michele Lucas replied that it was a part of the performance management

cycle which was highlighted in the WSoA and that this had always been the case.

Councillor Akinbohun questioned whether cost was an issue for the service. Michele Lucas replied that the Local Authority (LA) had recently increased resources for the service and had enabled more staffing in the service. The LA had been supportive to ensure there were enough resources for SEND.

Following up, Councillor Akinbohun asked whether the service considered there was a negligence on their part pre-Ofsted inspection as there had not been enough staff before. Michele Lucas answered no and explained that the decision to increase staff had been made before the Ofsted inspection so would not consider that there had been any negligence. What the service would ensure now was that the right training would be in place and the LA had provided more resources to ensure the service reached their journey to a 'Good' Ofsted rating.

Councillor Akinbohun sought clarification between new and old KPIs. Michele Lucas explained that the old KPIs would have been similar to the new KPIs with a 20 week target. There had been a significant increase in the number of plans completed within 20 weeks and looking at the wider SEND picture, the plan was to integrate into Children's Services as well. There was new training packages in place and an increase with management oversight.

Noting that a consultation had taken place, Councillor Anderson queried who had been involved. In response, Michele Lucas said that the consultation had been with her management team that had enabled the newly restructured management team to be established. She noted the point in the action was not clear and would strengthen upon it.

Moving onto page 16 of the agenda, Michele Lucas outlined the improvements for the governance area and said that the SEND Development had already met twice since its establishment. The Chair sought clarification on the acronym of PQBI. Explaining that it stood for Performance Quality Business Intelligence, Michele Lucas said that the PQBI worked with the service around data. She would expand on this point to make it clearer. Nicola Cranch commented that more points could be expanded for clarity and to show the strengths of the service.

On page 17 of the agenda, Michele Lucas explained the improvement area for record keeping. The Chair queried whether the SEND data integration project would be with schools, providers and other relevant parties. Michele Lucas answered that it would enable the systems mentioned in the appendix to communicate with each other thus enabling staff to use them efficiently and for reviews of all data to be undertaken in a timely manner.

Continuing on to page 18 on the significant weakness number 2, Michele Lucas explained this related to the quality assurances process. On page 18 of the agenda, Kate Bozlova-Boran added that the process of reviewing all post 16 provision had begun and would take a while which explained the timescale

given within the appendix. On pages 21 and 22 of the agenda, Malcolm Taylor walked the Committee through points 2 – 6.

Nicola Cranch questioned whether the timescales given were realistic. Malcolm Taylor replied the service was going through key areas with staff and building upon the work needed for improvement. The timescales given were appropriate and once finalised, it would be looked over by Ofsted and set. The timescales were realistic, as targets had to be achieved by this time.

Councillor Akinbohun sought more detail on the special schools outside of the borough. Malcolm Taylor explained that SEND children on EHCPs attended resource based schools depending on a variety of needs. The first choice was to meet those needs within the borough but sometimes due to a child's needs, some may need to seek a more specialist resource based school that was outside of the borough. The plan would be to discuss with the parent on the child's needs and it would be down to the parent's preference on school. If another school was available and would be able to meet the child's needs at a lower cost, the service may provide this suggestion to the parent.

Councillor Akinbohun questioned what the waiting time was for a school. Replying that waiting time was dependent on a child's circumstances, Malcolm Taylor went on to say that schools had to respond within a set time period and the service would consult several schools at the same time to prevent delays. Once the school was decided on, the child would begin attendance there.

Councillor Akinbohun went on to ask the number of years a child would have to stay at home if there was no available school and mentioned that there were many children in the borough that did not attend school. Malcolm Taylor understood there had been many challenges and were aware of the difficulties in finding school placements. Some parents did not want their children to attend out of borough schools and new arrangements had been setup. Treetops would have interim arrangements in place from October which would help with the interim period between the new resource based school opening.

Regarding out of borough schools, Councillor Potter questioned whether these were close enough for children to travel to. Malcolm Taylor answered that the first choice was always a nearby school but some parents were willing to travel further. In some circumstances, children were placed in boarding placements but these were usually under exceptional circumstances.

The Chair reminded the Committee to provide comments regarding the draft WSoA to ensure any necessary suggestions and comments to be included into the WSoA before it was sent to Ofsted.

Continuing with the draft WSoA, Malcolm Taylor and Kate Kozlova-Boran took the Committee through points 7 to 11. On point 11, the Chair questioned how the service was addressing working relationships between the service and relevant organisations rather than processes. Michele Lucas answered that

working relationships were important but it was also important in how the service worked with other relevant organisations. One of the strategic drivers was ensuring the right offer for young people was available locally. Some parents would look outside of the LA for their provision and there needed to be clarity on what the young person would get with their provision and this all starts with data. It was important that the transition was right first time round.

Going back to point 6, the Chair sought more detail on success measure proposed by March 2020. Malcolm Taylor explained visits would take place during the academic year and would expand on this point before sending to Ofsted.

Regarding KPIs for independent schools outside of the borough, Councillor Rigby questioned how this would be linked in to Thurrock's KPIs. Malcolm Taylor replied that there was a regional agreement where different LAs would visit other schools outside of the region and report to the eastern region. In addition to Ofsted, the service would ensure that there would be a key link in and on individual KPIs, there would be some flexibility and the service would look into how the KPIs could be used for these children. All options were looked at in the broadest sense and not just at education attainment.

Going onto significant weakness 3 of the draft WSoA, Michele Lucas outlined the EHCPs, which the service needed to ensure, was reflective. Referring to pages 25 and 26 of the agenda, the Chair sought clarification on the percentages to aim for and whether these would be past or future figures. Michele Lucas explained that the service would look at the baseline and strengthen in this area for clarification. The increase in percentage would also be looked at. She went on to explain that the feedback would be captured by the engagement officer to enable the service to look at the baseline and percentage increase.

Kate Kozlova-Boran, Michele Lucas and Andrea Winstone continued with points 1 and 2 on page 27 of the agenda. On point 2, the Chair asked what the role entailed. Andrea Winstone answered that the post would be advertised in September 2019 and it had been advertised before which had not been successful. The hope is that advertising at the start of the academic year may attract candidates that were more suitable. Malcolm Taylor added that the service was looking for a senior post to provide oversight of caseworkers and to work on tribunals. The tribunal system had changed and the LA was responsible for the paperwork of cases. There had been a recruitment process where candidates had not been suitable and there were interims in place at the moment. The timing of the post was crucial and the candidate had to have the right characteristics.

Councillor Akinbohun noted there was training scheduled every 2 weeks. She questioned whether this was realistic. Andrea Winstone confirmed this was a realistic training schedule and schools were aware of this. Michele Lucas added that the service had articulated how they would be moving forward. A good customer service training programme had been setup that all staff in Education and Skills had undertaken and report around this would be

produced for the SEND Development Board. The service would be assessing customer service regarding the delay in response times that sometimes occurred.

On EHCPs, the Chair commented that the service would need to work with other departments in the LA. She questioned how the service was ensuring this joined up work was effective. Malcolm Taylor explained that the service had been working the health team and identified internal issues. The health team would attend the service's group meetings and the service had engaged with other health organisations such as Thurrock Clinical Commissioning Group and North East London Foundation Trust.

The Chair commented that she would be interested in knowing the response times to customers. Referring to point 9 on page 30 of the agenda, the Chair questioned how the service could be sure the response times were within 5 days. Andrea Winstone answered that calls were logged through the synergy system and a reminder was set up to managers for the 5 day response time. This was reviewed with caseworkers every Friday. Late responses were also logged. In cases where there may not be a response regarding a school placement, a response would still be provided. The service was attempting to monitor emails but some parents would email case workers directly which was harder to monitor. The aim was to setup a generic email inbox.

Noting there was more hands on work, the Chair questioned how more of this type of work be incorporated into the draft WSoA. She was pleased to hear that the response time was being monitored and it was good that a response was given despite there being no real update. Andrea Winstone explained that the work was part of the customer service training that staff had undertaken. Malcolm Taylor added that this also picked up on the EHCPs.

Referring to point 13 on page 31 of the agenda, the Chair questioned why there was only 3 members of staff on the casework training. Andrea Winstone explained this was 3 out of the 6 staff members and all would be trained by July 2020 as it was a yearlong course. It was hoped that staff would remain in the service after completing their course.

Regarding page 32 of the agenda, Michele Lucas explained that the information captured would be used to inform practices which would be embedded into a system that could manage the information.

Councillor Anderson noted that the timescales were a long while away and questioned when an update would be provided to the Committee. Michele Lucas answered that the draft WSoA would be submitted to Ofsted on 12 August and Ofsted may or may not accept the WSoA. If they did not, the service would have to amend the draft WSoA and send it back to Ofsted for a second review. Until Ofsted's decision, the item would remain a standing item on the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny work programme. A verbal update would be brought to the meeting on 8 October 2019 and the clearer report of the progress review would be brought back to the 3 December 2019 meeting depending on Ofsted's decision. The Committee agreed to this.

The Chair asked if the Committee had added value to the draft WSoA to which Michele Lucas confirmed the Committee had. She went on to say that the comments and feedback had been useful and would be incorporated into the draft WSoA.

RESOLVED:

That O&S reviewed the written statement of action and provide feedback before the document is sent for Ofsted approval.

The meeting finished at 8.28 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

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Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk**