

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 13 July 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Sara Muldowney (Chair), Graham Snell (Vice-Chair), Abbie Akinbohun, Alex Anderson, Lee Watson and James Thandi (Substitute) (substitute for Susan Little)

Sarah Barlow, Church of England Representative
Nicola Cranch, Parent Governor Representative
Sally Khawaja, Parent Governor Representative

Apologies: Councillor Susan Little

In attendance:

Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills
Janet Simon, Interim Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help
Catherine Wilson, Strategic Lead Commissioning and Procurement
Andrea Winstone, Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND
Priscilla Bruce-Annan, Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business Manager
Youth Cabinet
Wendy Le, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being live streamed and recorded, with the video recording to be made available on the Council's website.

1. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 February 2021 were approved as a true and correct record.

2. Items of Urgent Business

The Chair had agreed to an item of urgent business which was a verbal update from Sheila Murphy on the recent Ofsted inspection.

Sheila Murphy said that Ofsted had attended the inspection virtually to inspect the Children's Services areas that managed extra familial harm cases such as child sexual and criminal exploitation and gangs and county lines. Overall, the inspection had been positive in terms of the practices that the service had put in place. Ofsted had said that they could see improvements made from the 2019 inspection and gave some feedback but the official letter would be

published in August 2021. This would not be a judgement of the usual ratings of 'Requires Improvement' and 'Good'. Ofsted had said that Thurrock Council was a good authority and continued to be a good authority.

The Chair questioned whether Ofsted had indicated of any areas that may need improvement. Sheila Murphy said that one area that Ofsted had mentioned was the return to home interviews where the uptake for these from young people were low. Ofsted had asked what more could the service do to encourage more uptake from young people. There were also some issues around placements for 18+ year olds which was an item on the agenda that evening.

3. Declaration of Interests

Sarah Barlow declared that she worked in a school in Thurrock.

4. Youth Cabinet Update

The Youth Cabinet (YC) provided the following update:

- The YC continued to meet virtually and face to face where possible to ensure young people's voices continued to be heard.
- The Member of Youth Parliament (MYP) attended meetings to hear the concerns raised by other young people on topics such as climate change, accessible education for young people and young people's mental health. These fed into the YC's projects such as plastic pollution.
- The YC was currently running the Boom Project which explored young people's views on physical and mental health as part of the Brighter Futures Strategy. This focused on writing, drawing and music as new ways that young people could express themselves. 29 young people and 4 YC members worked on this and the team would be putting a video together that would show the work done and to send out a message directly from young people.
- The YC was focusing on subjects of mental health for young people by working with mental health services; plastic pollution by creating more recyclable bins; and gang county lines by creating awareness videos for young people.
- The YC was working in partnership with the police to build a stronger and more positive relationship to support both sides to benefit the community overall. Both sides wished to improve on was ensuring that young people was following the information given by the police and for the police to engage with young people at a young age to build a positive relationship. A short Youtube clip would be produced to inform young people of gangs and knife crime and to also reach young people on other social media platforms on these issues. The police would also attend the YC monthly meetings to give community updates.
- The YC continued to work and adapt their projects to ensure the best outcomes for young people. They aimed to create partnerships to

engage all members of the community who supported young people's voices.

The Committee welcomed the new members of the YC and commended them on their hard work. The Committee was pleased to see the YC focus on subjects of grooming, county lines and plastic pollution. Officers offered the YC support when they needed it.

5. Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Partnership - Update on the LSCP Peer Review Action Plan

The report was presented by Priscilla Bruce-Annan.

Councillor Watson questioned what the timeline was for the action plan to be completed by and if the service was confident in completing the action plan on time. Priscilla Bruce-Annan answered that there was no actual date for the action plan to be completed by as each action had its own deadline. She said that the aim was to complete action plan by the end of this year. Most of the actions that were on amber were near completion and the service was confident that the action plan would be completed by the end of the year.

In regards to the Independent Chair Scrutineer (ICS), the Vice-Chair questioned whether the role was paid and how it was independent from the Council. Officers explained that the role was paid by the partnership as the ICS was paid for their expertise and scrutinised the partnership. The post was for 3 years so a new ICS would be employed every 3 years to ensure that independence. The ICS was independent from the LSCP and was not involved in its operations or strategies.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted the Action Plan and progress to date.

6. SEND Education and Residential Placements

The report was presented by Michele Lucas and Catherine Wilson.

The Chair thought that there were some good provisions in Thurrock and asked if the service had considered to provide the placements themselves. Michele Lucas answered that the report detailed some of the local provisions and that there were currently a number of local provisions in place that worked well. In the main colleges, it was the residential placements that the service could not provide locally as these were more complex SEND cases.

Councillor Anderson noted that the service was good at keeping children within the borough. He questioned whether the number of children placed outside the borough had increased or decreased over the past 5 – 10 years. Michele Lucas explained that the service was seeing more complex SEND cases but the number of children placed outside of the borough remained static. She highlighted that this could change at any time as parents could

decide to place their children out of the borough. The service tried to keep children within the borough but in some complex cases, children needed a residential placement.

Nicola Cranch asked how many children were waiting for an EHCP and how long was this process. She also asked how many were completed on time. Andrea Winstone said that there were currently 135 EHCPs in process which usually took 20 weeks from start to finish. There were no late EHCPs this month and the service heavily monitored these. There was not a waiting for an EHCP but there was a waiting time from an EHCP request to publication and last year, the service had over 80% EHCPs on time compared to the national figure of 60%. She said that EHCPs tended to end when education finished for a young person.

Sally Khawaja asked how many EHCPs were refused and how many of these went to appeal. Andrea Winstone said that EHCPs were a two-step process where the request to access came through first and then it was decided whether an EHCP was needed or not. The service would not issue a plan if the child's needs could be met through SEND support in school. The number of these that went to appeal was under 5%.

Councillor Watson sought further details on the data provided in 3.3. Michele Lucas said that she would send further details via email.

Councillor Watson asked what provision had been provided through Grangewaters and how often these were used. Michele Lucas answered that the service had listened to their post-16 cohort and had identified that outdoor education was a powerful tool particularly for SEND children. A range of programmes had been developed that included class based work and outdoor activities at Grangewaters. The feedback from these programmes had been positive. SEND children used the outdoor facilities twice a week.

Councillor Akinbohun asked how quick were placements offered to children placed outside of the borough. Michele Lucas explained that the service needed to consider whether the child's needs could be met within the profile of the school and if there was space in that school. Each case was different but the service ensured that children still had access to education. She said that the consultation process could be challenging and that there were not enough school places for the number of children coming into the service.

Councillor Watson questioned the process of deciding where a child would be placed. Michele Lucas explained that where a school felt that they were unable to meet a child's needs then they would discuss this with the parents. This would then come to the SEND panel to assess. The process relied on a partnership approach.

The Vice-Chair said that he was surprised to see the number of children needing SEND places in Thurrock and was concerned the lack of SEND places available. He asked whether SEND children outside of the borough had to wait for places as well and how many were usually accepted. Michele

Lucas answered that the data for this would be circulated via email. She said that Thurrock had two Ofsted rated 'outstanding' SEND schools and families moved into the borough because of these schools. The service made families aware that the schools had a waiting list and would need to go through the tribunal process to assess whether their child needed to go to that SEND school. If the assessment showed that the child needed to go to a SEND school, it was a legal requirement for the SEND school to take the child in. This was also the case where the service had to place children outside of the borough.

Councillor Thandi questioned what the teaching was like in SEND schools. Michele Lucas said that there were no issues with the teachers in SEND schools and that the issue was the number of places available. Both of Thurrock's SEND schools worked hard to main the 'outstanding' rating and the schools had their own training programme.

The Chair thought that that out of borough placements were expensive and it was good to see that the service was taking a sensible approach to address the issue with SEND placements. She commented that it was good to have a framework in place. She said that she could not understand why Cabinet had decided that Grangewaters was a surplus to the service's requirements as the report indicated that this was a part of the provision offered to SEND children. She proposed a new recommendation as 1.3 to address this.

Councillor Anderson and the Vice-Chair agreed recommendation 1.1 and 1.2 but did not agree with the additional recommendation that was 1.3.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That members reviewed the SEND Sufficiency Assessment and agree the publication of the document.**
- 1.2 That members give approval for the next stage of the procurement process and agree to officers approaching cabinet for approval to proceed to procurement of out of borough placements and were required expand the local provision.**

UNRESOLVED:

- 1.3 Members requested that Cabinet reviews their decision to declare Grangewaters as a surplus to SEND provision and to look at further use of Grangewaters to meeting the objectives for SEND provision.**

7. Supported Accommodation for 18-24 Year Olds

The report was presented by Catherine Wilson.

The Chair asked for an example of how block purchasing could meet the needs of a young person and also improve value for money. She also asked if

the service had considered investing in their own housing for care leavers. Catherine Wilson answered that the framework had two elements where they would individually purchase provision from a provider. If the service requested for more units, the provider would look to build or refurbish housing for the service and work together to establish a price for those blocks of accommodation. This helped to place young people in housing more quickly and there would be an expectation that there would be support immediately available for a young person. She went on to say that the service was working with the Housing Department to identify what was available in the borough for care leavers. These may be identified through the Council's housing stock or through a developer. She said that this was not within the report but it was something that the service was considering.

The Chair commented that if the service owned the provision, it would be better value for money as this would be a good income stream for the Council. Michele Lucas referred to the current scheme of Head Start Housing where the Council had allocated money to the service to purchase a number of properties for care leavers. This was a model that the service would build upon.

Councillor Watson asked how many young people were 25 years old and transitioning to other types of housing. Catherine Wilson said that she would look into the data and circulate to Members via email.

Councillor Watson asked whether Thurrock's housing strategy included children leaving care and transition into another property. Janet Simon said that the service tried to plan for a young person's transition early to establish the young person's needs early on. The service had around 280 care leavers aged between 18 – 25 years old and the service had a duty to continue to support care leavers up to the age of 25. However, the service recognised that not all young people would be ready to have their own property by 25 years old.

Referring to page 65, Councillor Anderson sought more detail on how the work within the report would support the homelessness prevention and rough sleeping strategy. Catherine Wilson explained that supported accommodation would help to ensure young people were not left homeless and to help them transition into their own property.

Referring to page 66, Sally Khawaja noted that some care leaver would need placements outside the borough. She questioned who would be responsible for the care leavers in this situation. Janet Simon said that the care leavers remained the responsibility of the local authority that had accommodated them. However, a young person was free to choose whether or not to continue with the care and whether access housing within the borough that they would be placed in. The service aimed to help young people who chose the latter option.

Councillor Akinbohun asked how long a young person had to wait for housing and whether they could come back to Thurrock if they had been

placed outside the borough. Janet Simon said that there was no joint protocol within housing but some care leavers chose to stay with a foster carer where possible. Some care leavers would go into halls and the service had plans early in place to identify which ones needed housing or not. There were no young people on the housing waiting list and young people were kept informed of these processes. If a young person wished to come back into the borough, the service would try to accommodate this.

Councillor Thandi asked if a young person could transition into private accommodation. Janet Simon explained that this was dependent on the young person's needs and whether they were able to look after themselves. She said that some young people would remain in foster care whilst they waited for housing and that a change in housing was all dependent on whether a young person was ready or not.

The Chair proposed to add an additional recommendation – 1.3.

RESOLVED:

1.1 That members reviewed the joint work that is already in place and the statutory duties on the local authority including to develop a jointly commissioned support offer for those aged 18+ who need additional support to be able to develop independence as an adult and where possible this is extended to provide support for the 16-18 year olds.

1.2 That members recommended to cabinet the commissioning of a framework of supported accommodation providers including the option to block purchase provision.

1.3 Members recommended that Cabinet investigate into opportunities to invest in housing to help meet the provision that Children's Services need to meet the supported accommodation requirements for care leavers.

8. SEND Inspection Outcome - Written Statement of Actions Update

The report was presented by Michele Lucas.

The Committee commented that it was good to see that the action plan now had more completed actions or actions in progress. He noted the good work that had taken place and said that it was good to hear of the work undertaken with Parent Carer Forum.

Referring to 2.2, Councillor Watson sought clarification on who chaired the SEND Improvement Board. Sheila Murphy answered that she chaired the board and that they had worked hard and challenged themselves. She said that the board was working with the Parent Carer Forum and listening to their views. The Chair commented that she had received feedback from a parent with a child on a SEND EHCP who was pleased with the EHCP as it now more centre focused on the child. The parent had said that they felt included.

RESOLVED:

O&S to scrutinise the work that has been undertaken during the period outlined in the report and offer support and challenge.

9. Thurrock's Education Landscape

The report was presented by Andrea Winstone.

Sally Khawaja asked how secondary school grades would be monitored as there was currently no national data released due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Andrea Winstone explained that schools had completed their end of term assessments regardless of whether these would be published or not by the DfE. This would be scored against a CAT test in autumn. The national government had not confirmed how the progress of secondary school pupils would be measured and these questions would be raised in meetings that the service would have with schools.

The Committee noted that Thurrock's secondary schools had below average scores and asked what measures were in place to improve these. They questioned whether the Council could have an input in ensuring that schools improved their scores. The Committee raised queries over how reading ages were monitored. Andrea Winstone answered that the low achievement on grades 9 – 4 were from 2019. She said that it was the responsibility of the schools to work with their teaching hub to improve upon these scores. The schools in Thurrock were academies except for one and the responsibility lay with the school's inspector. The Council had conversations with schools to ensure leadership within schools were strengthened and to promote education excellency to improve on scores. The Council discussed concerns openly, met with the Regional Schools Commissioner and also met with the DfE and the key was partnership. In regards to reading ages, she explained that the schools had internal data in these and ensured that children were moving along the reading ages. The service also held conversations on this subject.

The Chair questioned what the Council's position was when a MAT school received an 'inadequate' Ofsted rating. She also noted that 70% of Thurrock's secondary schools were currently rated as 'good' and 'outstanding' which was below the England and east of England average. She commented that this was a deteriorating picture rather than an improving one. Andrea Winstone explained that a MAT school with an 'inadequate' Ofsted rating would have an improvement plan in place and if it did not improve, it would move to another MAT but kept its 'inadequate' Ofsted rating. She went on to say that the 70% of Thurrock's 'good' and 'outstanding' secondary schools was a static picture as there had not been any inspections since those schools had moved to a MAT so had remained at 70% for about 4 years now. When some of these schools have their inspections, it was expected that they should receive a 'good' rating.

RESOLVED:

Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny to review the current educational landscape and scrutinise the current partnership arrangements.

10. Impact of Covid-19 on Education and Children's Social Care

The report was presented by Michele Lucas and Janet Simon.

The Chair said that teachers, staff and social workers had put in an exceptional amount of work to keep children educated during the Covid-19 pandemic and congratulated them on their hard work. She commented that she would have liked to see a roadmap for education out of lockdown but she acknowledged the difficulties in acquiring the data. She said that children had been impacted the most as she had heard of regression in some areas such as potty training, reading and writing. She raised concerns over the care leavers in NEET and questioned what plans were in place to resolve these issues. Michele Lucas explained that the service used Inspire and the government's kickstart scheme had helped young people as the service had just recruited 5 young people under this scheme. She said that care leavers had struggled during lockdown and the service was working with them through programmes that they were monitoring closely.

Councillor Anderson commented that some children had not been able to physically see family during lockdown which was distressing. He questioned what plans were in place for face to face contact once the lockdown restrictions ended. Janet Simon said that most children had already had that face to face contact safely such as in the park.

Councillor Watson thanked the service for their hard work. She questioned how the service had been supporting young carers who have had to look after a vulnerable parent during lockdown. The service had been trying to support these young carers by encouraging them to go out when possible. The ones known to the service, a social worker had been seeing them. There had also been discussions in encouraging family members to help young carers.

At 9.15pm, the Committee agreed to suspend standing orders until 9.45pm to enable the rest of the agenda to be completed.

Councillor Akinbohun asked what support had been in place for children's mental health during lockdown and when children would have the Covid-19 vaccination. Janet Simon said that meetings had been held between young people and mental health colleagues. Parents or carers' mental health were also monitored as it could impact children. Social workers had continued to see children and make referrals to mental health services where needed and the service was supportive in ensuring that children had that respite. Michele Lucas said that the covid vaccinations were not offered to children yet but it

would be a parents' decision. The service and schools could not insist on these.

The Vice-Chair said that SEND children had returned to school after the first lockdown and had settled back in without issues. However, children in mainstream schools had returned later and had picked up some challenging behaviours that were not present before. He felt the report needed to be come back in 6 months to update the Committee on this issue.

RESOLVED:

1.1 Children's O&S to note the support provided to vulnerable children and young people over the past year.

1.2 Children's O&S to consider other areas of support going forward as we look to the recovery phase from Covid-19.

11. Children's Social Care Performance - Quarter 4 2020-21

The report was presented by Janet Simon.

Councillor Akinbohun questioned why there was reduction in the amount of foster carers. Janet Simon explained that it was not unusual for a decrease to be seen as some foster carers were older so would decide to retire. Some may also move out of the area or decide that fostering was not suitable for them. She stated that a loss of 14 was not a huge amount.

Councillor Thandi asked whether the council tax exemption had increased the number of foster carers. Janet Simon stated that the exemption came into force in April 2021 and that it would take a while to recruit foster carers due to the processes. She said that the service was currently refreshing its brand and strategy and would be going out to campaign again soon.

RESOLVED:

That members reviewed the areas of improvement in Children's Social Care and work undertaken to date to manage demand for statutory social care services.

12. Work Programme

Democratic Services explained the process of briefing notes which had been implemented following on from the Scrutiny Review last year. Members agreed for briefing notes to be sent in between meetings and were aware that they could request a full report of a briefing note if needed.

The Chair had requested for a Child Poverty Refresh Review to be undertaken. Officers would look into this as it involved other departments of the Council.

The work programme was updated as follows:

- Ofsted Inspection Outcome – TBC for 12 October 2021.
- CAMHS Procurement Outcome – TBC for 12 October 2021.
- Update on School Grades Data (from the Thurrock's Education Landscape report) – TBC for 12 October 2021.
- Health and Wellbeing Strategy Refresh 2021-2026 – moved to 1 December 2021.
- Update on Impact of Covid-19 on Education and Children's Social Care (how children have settled back into schools) – added to 8 February 2022.

The meeting finished at 9.40 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**