

## **Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 November 2021 at 6.00 pm**

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

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

**In attendance:** Jo Broadbent, Director of Public Health  
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills  
Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services  
Janet Simon, Interim Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help  
Andrea Winstone, Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND  
Grace Le, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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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.

The Chair stated that there was a time limit for the use of the South Essex College venue which was until 9.30pm. She said that if the items on the agenda were not concluded by 9.30pm, the meeting would be adjourned and would recommence at the next meeting.

### **24. Items of Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

The Committee confirmed that they had received and read the briefing note – Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services Procurement which was circulated on 30 September 2021.

### **25. Declaration of Interests**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **26. Review of High Risk Notifications provided by Children's Social Care (EXEMPT)**

Under Part I of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, the report was restricted and discussions on the report were held in exempt session.

## **27. Children's Social Care Performance - Quarter 1 2021-22**

The report was presented by Janet Simon.

Referring to EET, Councillor Watson queried whether there were any young people with concerns and if the Adult Social Care (ASC) Team was working with young people through the transition process. Janet Simon answered that ASC was supporting young people. She said that a social worker supported young people up to 18 years old and that there was an aftercare service in place after this.

The Vice-Chair asked when return home interviews were carried out and why there was a low uptake on these. Officers explained that the police was informed once a child returned home and then Inspire would offer the return home interviews. Some young people did not want to take a return home interview and the service was trying to think of creative ways to engage a young person in these. The service recognised this was a key area of focus for them which had been identified in the Focus Visit from Ofsted. However, some young people did not want a return home interview and preferred to speak with their social worker or placement instead of the independent service. Some young people felt that they had the right to go where they wanted and a lot of the missing cases were 16 – 17 year olds. Where young people spoke to their carer or social worker instead of through the return home interview, the service was looking into adding this into the process to ensure it was logged. Inspire was an opportunity for young people to use if they felt they could not speak to their carer.

The Committee queried if there were more males or females in care and if police were involved in missing episodes. Officers answered that there were more males than females in care and that police visited after a child returned home. The Chair recommended that areas of improvement be added into the next report.

### **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.**

## **28. Thurrock Childcare Sufficiency Annual Assessment 2021**

The Chair referred to page 52 and commented that the prices for childcare were shocking and was concerned that some families would not be able to afford these prices. She questioned whether there were funded childcare places for 2 year olds. She pointed out that families earning the living wage would not qualify for funded places and with the amount spent on childcare

costs, it was hardly worth working. She felt that childcare costs were not affordable for Thurrock residents and that there were no provisions during the school holidays in which parents still had to work. Andrea Winstone answered that there were funded childcare places that most parents were entitled to and that these were usually for 3 to 4 year olds. She explained that the childcare rates were from nurseries who provided the childcare and that the provision was there. She said that there was no government funding for 2 year olds as the provision was economically low. There were some schools that provided free after school provisions and children with free school meals had access to holiday provisions.

Councillor Watson thought the breakdown of the nursery provisions in each ward was useful. Referring to the figures in Tilbury and St Chads, she noted that provision was needed and was concerned that there would not be enough due to the two nurseries closing in Tilbury. Michele Lucas said that the consultation for the two nurseries had just ended and potential providers had stated that if they had the capabilities to increase the capacities if needed. She stated that she was cautiously optimistic with finding providers for the nurseries as there were still processes to be completed. Andrea Winstone explained that there had not been issues of parents unable to find childcare placements in the Tilbury and St Chads and that the figures were based on the number of children in the area, not the number of provisions needed as not all parents sent their children into nurseries.

The Chair mentioned a nursery in Chadwell that had been closed and sought more detail which officers would discuss outside of the meeting.

The Chair noted that 8 out of 22 wards had insufficient childcare placements and that one of the wards would have significant development taking place. Michele Lucas explained that the report enabled potential providers to identify where there were opportunities for childcare facilities. It was the statutory duty of the Council to provide placement and the service worked with providers on this.

The Chair asked whether private providers could provide affordable and flexible childcare placements. Michele Lucas explained that the business model for childcare businesses included government funded places and private charges. There were some schools that were keen to include nurseries in their schools to enable a child to start nursery there to ensure an education pathway in the school. Andrea Winstone said that there was a Childcare Sufficiency Officer that worked with providers to ensure they were supported. She said that there were not full nurseries in the borough so there was no demand for more placements.

The Chair queried whether there was data on the number of providers that had closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Andrea Winstone answered that there were two. One was not financially viable and the other one was unable to acquire the number of placements needed to keep the nursery running. No providers had lost money due to the pandemic as they were paid through the Early Years Funding.

The Chair requested that a briefing note to be circulated to the Committee to update them on the progress of finding providers.

**RESOLVED:**

**That Children's Services O&S reviewed and approved the Annual Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2021.**

**29. Low Income Families and Child Poverty update (2021) for the Children and Young People JSNA product (2017)**

The report was presented by Jo Broadbent.

The Chair commented that the government had abolished the child poverty act but the issues was still present. She noted that the report showed an increase to 1 in 3 children living in poverty and questioned the impact of this on children. Jo Broadbent answered that children growing up in poverty were affected by a range of factors such as future outcomes, growing up disadvantaged, poorer health, higher risk of teen pregnancy, risky behaviour and higher risk of this cycle leading into future generations. There was a need to work with parents to help them find well paid work.

The Chair noted the DfE's plan to tackle child poverty through education and asked if this required more than just a focus on education. Jo Broadbent explained that this related to the next item on the agenda and that broader strategies were needed to address child poverty.

Referring to the State of the Nation government report, the Chair commented that this was the most recent data on child poverty and enquired what recommendations the service had taken from this report. Jo Broadbent stated that she would not be able to provide a full answer as the highlights from that report had been considered as part of the current report. She said that the State of the Nation report set out how Local Authorities could support families in deprived areas with free school meals and other initiatives to. She highlighted that there were a broader range of issues to consider alongside child poverty such as food poverty.

The Chair enquired about the Brighter Futures Strategy (BFS) and if Covid-19 pandemic had impacted upon this. She said that a range of other issues needed to be considered alongside the BFS. Sheila Murphy explained that this strategy was broken down into key priorities that included education and mental health. It looked at improving the lives of children and other agencies were involved such as Public Health, schools and the police to ensure a good representation on the board. She said that referrals had continued during Covid-19 and that missing education had caused issues for children and making sure that they were able to catch up with this. As services such as children's centres had closed during the pandemic, parents were not able to use the support of these services and may have escalated to other issues such as mental health. She said that there were other funding such as for

school holidays, activities that included lunch and the Essential Living Fund (ELF) from government.

The Chair asked how long the ELF process took. Sheila Murphy answered that the process was relatively quick as it was designed for emergency situations. The Local Authority had also put extra funding in to support this process.

The Committee agreed to suspend standing orders at 8.18pm to allow the agenda to be completed.

Referring to appendix 1, Councillor Watson asked if the JSNA was a continuous updated document every year. She asked if other JSNAs were fed into child poverty strategy. She sought clarification on the data used and the action plan on child poverty. Jo Broadbent answered that the process was to cover a range of topics and not consider just one topic each year. She said that there were a range of JSNAs and council policies that included child poverty as these were interrelated and that the most up to date data was used. The Brighter Futures Strategy would be circulated to Members.

#### **RESOLVED:**

**1.1 The Committee were asked to consider and comment on the content of the updated chapter for the Children's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment product.**

**1.2 The committee were asked to agree that this updated chapter is added to the published document.**

### **30. Thurrock Health and Wellbeing Strategy Refresh**

The report was presented by Jo Broadbent.

The Vice-Chair mentioned that the report had also been heard at Health and Wellbeing O&S last week and Members had asked that the survey to be shortened. Jo Broadbent answered that the survey comprised of a tick box exercise on the first page and then went on to more specific questions. There had been 65 responses so far although there were less responses on the more specific questionnaires.

The Chair commented that the strategy was big and queried on how accessible this was for everyone. Jo Broadbent explained that the strategy was of a high level and technical and the service had been working with HealthWatch and CVS who were asking simpler questions to engage people. This information was shared with the service who was able to incorporate this into their survey.

Councillor Thandi asked if air quality was included in the survey and whether there was a solution to reduce this in Thurrock. He also asked why life expectancy was low in Thurrock. Jo Broadbent explained that reducing air

quality was difficult and that there was currently no air quality monitoring officer in place to manage this area. There were a number of concerns on the impact on air quality from large developments such as the Lower Thames Crossing. On the low life expectancy, she explained that this was due to inter-generational and deprivation issues. Thurrock had one of the highest smoking and obesity rates in the country.

In regards to obesity, Councillor Akinbohun pointed out that there was not enough help for young people with their weight as gyms were too expensive so young people in deprived areas were unable to afford memberships. She stated that the high street was filled with fast food restaurants with no healthy options. She said that the increase of fast food delivery services only made it easier to order fast food. Jo Broadbent answered that there was a weight management service that was funded by Public Health and that extra funding had been provided this year to tackle obesity which would consider a range of approaches. She said that there were some Local Authorities that banned fast food services near schools which would be something for Thurrock to consider.

The Vice-Chair thought that the strategy was sensible and achievable but the issue was public engagement. He felt that shorter questions were needed and that the current questionnaire was a fail. Jo Broadbent said that the strategy had been due to start before the pandemic and would have taken a different approach.

Councillor Watson enquired about the timeline of the strategy. Jo Broadbent answered that the engagement process would end in December, then the first draft would go onto the Health and Wellbeing Board in January before going onto other committees. It would eventually go onto Full Council.

Councillor Watson noted that the procedure was council based and not national government. She pointed out that the strategy could be pushed back to enable a better consultation to take place. The Chair agreed and said that the questionnaires needed to be better worded and clarified. Jo Broadbent said that she would consult with the Health and Wellbeing Board and Portfolio Holder. She stated that the strategy had already been pushed back once and would be out of date by December.

**RESOLVED:**

**That members noted the consultation exercise, consider and propose opportunities to engage the public and interested parties during the consultation period.**

**The meeting finished at 9.04 pm**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIR**

**DATE**

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Democratic Services at [Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk](mailto:Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk)**