

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 16 November 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Elizabeth Rigby (Chair), Sara Muldowney (Vice-Chair), Qaisar Abbas, Vikki Hartstean, Srikanth Panjala and Maureen Pearce

Parent Governor Representative, Nicola Cranch

Apologies: Church of England Representative Sarah Barlow and Kim James

In attendance: Sheila Murphy, Executive Director Children's Services
Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help
Sarah Williams, Service Manager, Education Support Service
Rhiannon Whiteley, Senior 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.

21. Minutes

The minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny meeting held on 12 September 2023 were approved as a correct record save that the Parent Governor Representative was not recorded as in attendance.

22. Items of Urgent Business

The Vice Chair confirmed that the RAAC item had been moved off the agenda for the meeting as the work programme was full. However, as items have fallen away there is time to hear the issue now as an urgent item of business. The Vice Chair noted that the Portfolio Holder for Education was present. The Vice Chair requested an update on how schools were progressing with providing temporary accommodation as the briefing note shared stated that this would be happening in mid-November.

The Head of Education Support Services confirmed that there had been some changes since the briefing note and providing a full update report to the Committee at the next meeting in January would be beneficial.

All children remain in school as the mitigation plans are being worked on. Two schools have large marquees, at the Thameside Primary school this is to accommodate the breakfast club only and all children are being taught in classrooms. A marquee is also going into Arthur Bugler School. The

marquees are heated. Members were invited to visit to view them. The Head of Education Support Services highlighted that the specification for the marquees was put together by the Department of Education.

The Vice Chair stated she had concerns about the use of a marquee in the winter months.

The Head of Education Support Services confirmed they are not going ahead with temporary accommodation at St Clere's and instead plan to bring forward the remedial works.

The Vice Chair invited the Portfolio Holder for Education to confirm if he viewed the arrangements were satisfactory.

The Vice Chair asked the Portfolio Holder for Education "*Have you visited the school Councillor Carter?*", Councillor Carter responded "*no, not Thameside*".

The Portfolio Holder for Education clarified that 54 out of the 55 schools in Thurrock were Academies and therefore the Improvement Grant which covers improvements to school buildings was between the Department of Education and the Academies. In terms of Education achievement Councillor Carter confirmed that Thurrock has had success with its primary schools and secondary schools are also improving.

The Head of Education Support Services confirmed that all primary school children are receiving face-to-face learning. At St Clere's secondary school years 8, 9 and 10 are receiving hybrid teaching but it is hoped this will only be up until 27 November 2023.

Members queried what the hybrid arrangements were. The Head of Education Support Services confirmed she did not have the details but could obtain it. Parents are being kept fully updated and the school meets weekly with the Department of Education too. Work has started at Corringham.

The Head of Education Support Services confirmed that she will arrange a visit for Committee members.

23. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

24. Youth Cabinet Update

Representatives from the Youth Cabinet were not in attendance at the meeting so the Chair noted that a written report was provided in the agenda and moved on to the next item.

25. Children's Social Care Performance - Quarter 1 2023-24

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help presented the report.

- The Vice Chair requested that the statistical neighbour and national data be put back into graph format as it is easier for members to see the visual representation even if it is written in the detail. Members have to read a lot each week and absorb a lot of data.
- Members queried that the data was being compared to national data from 21/22. The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that the 23/24 data had not been released yet.
- Members queried that 41% of MASH referrals resulted in no further action.
- The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help clarified that no further action was misleading and what it means is that cases aren't referred further into Children's Social Care. The department are looking at a better way of wording this outcome as it can mean a variety of things. As a result of contacts received, cases may be stepped down to early help, referred to universal services and MASH also signpost people. It was also confirmed this is not a figure the department are worried about and they monitor trends from previous years for example, referrals often go up before the summer holidays. In August referrals are lower as children aren't in school.
- The Vice Chair commended the excellent performance on assessments being completed within timescales.
- The Vice Chair queried the low adoption numbers
- The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed the authority is small, there are still court delays and parents often appeal which delays adoption. The numbers are always under 20 annually and therefore 5 adoptions in the first quarter is about right.
- The Executive Director of Children's Services confirmed that the department focus on rapid permanency planning for under 5's but this is not always adoption and could be special guardianship with a family member or being rehabilitated home.
- Members queried the ages of Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers in the Local Authority's care
- The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed they are normally 16 or 17 and male. The Authority has received a child as young as 14 but this is rare. They report fleeing violence, being in fear of their own safety or their families have disappeared. They have often experienced real trauma.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That members review the areas of good practice and performance in Children's Social Care and work undertaken to date to manage demand for statutory social care services.**
- 1.2 Members provide appropriate challenges around areas for development or any areas of concern.**

26. **Update: Stable Homes, Built on Love: Government Implementation Strategy and Consultation on Children's Social Care Reform 2023**

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help presented the report.

- Members queried social workers caseloads compared with statistical neighbours. The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed they believe they are comparable. In the 2019 Ofsted inspection they commented that caseload numbers were appropriate. If caseloads are too high social workers cannot build relationships. There is not a national standard for caseloads. It is also not an exact science some cases demand more time than others, the court team caseloads are often lower as the cases are more complex.

Councillor Rigby joined the meeting at 19:54

- Members queried why social workers leave. The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that they always complete exit interviews to learn what to do differently. Reasons given are moving to agency work to earn more money, working closer to home or different opportunities. They are not saying caseloads are too high or they are not supported. The department does have a lot of scrutiny and panels but this is to make sure the decisions being made are right.
- The Committee discussed the placement crisis and huge costs of residential care.
- The Vice Chair highlighted the Council's financial situation and queried plans to cut non-statutory services. The Executive Director for Children's Services confirmed that so far the department has been well supported and everyone understands the importance of Early Help and the savings identified are not looking at Early Help. Early Help is about preventing high costs further down the line. The Executive Director for Children's Services stated that she could not say that non-statutory services won't be cut and noted that more savings will be required each year.
- Members queried if there had been any feedback on the family hubs yet
- The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help responded that feedback had been received and it was positive. Families can receive services from social care, midwives and Health Visitors in one place. Members were invited to visit.
- Members queried if the Authority received funding for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children. The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed they received some funding but it does not cover all the costs.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the Government's implementation strategy for reforms to children's social care and the potential impact these will have on service delivery over the next few years.**
- 1.2 That Overview & Scrutiny note actions taken thus far in implementing the Government Strategy.**

27. Children's Transport Contract Procurement 2024

The Head of Education Support Services introduced the report and stated that the contracts for Children's Transport provision were extended by one year and agreed by Cabinet on 15 March 2023. The extension was agreed from September 2023 to July 2024. The provision of home to school transport is a statutory duty on the Local Authority and a re-procurement exercise is required. This report recommends a full re-procurement of the Children's home to school Transport for the start of the academic year 2024/2025 to ensure best value is achieved and to allow for new transport operators to join during the contract period.

The Head of Education Support Services stated that under the current framework to procure transport operators, once closed, no new operators can join. Market engagement with operators has been completed and they have also looked at what other Local Authorities do. The Home to School transport policy will be reviewed shortly as new statutory guidance was received in June. Further updates will be provided to the Committee.

Consultation between Essex and Thurrock regarding the license Essex pays for and if Thurrock will be required to contribute. The Dynamic Purchasing system will give Thurrock a greater pool of operators who can come on board at any time. They will have to go through compliance and obtain a license. Some of the operators Thurrock use are already onboarded with Essex.

- The Vice Chair commented that she found it unlikely Essex would not charge Thurrock for the onboarding and sought a direct comparison of costs now and what they will be
- The Vice Chair queried what the impact would be on local operators. The Head of Education Support Services stated that they have met with operators. They are aware they can complete the onboarding and apply for contracts as they do now, they do not want to put any operators out of business.
- The Parent Governor representative highlighted the importance of autistic children needing stability and the same operator is important.
- Members raised concern about recommending option 4 in the absence of the costs information. They noted the decision is due to be made by Cabinet on 13 December and the next committee meeting for Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny is not until January

- The Vice Chair commented that she would not want to recommend option 4 without having the costings confirmed
- The Chair proposed alternative wording to recommendation 1.1 adding the words “*subject to comparative costing with current system*” which was seconded by Councillor Abbas
- The Chair, Councillor Abbas and Councillor Pearce agreed with recommendation 1.1. Councillor Muldowney, Councillor Hartstean and Councillor Panjala did not agree to recommendation 1.1.
- All Committee members agreed to recommendation 1.2.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 Children’s Overview and Scrutiny recommend Cabinet agree the recommendation for the Council to collaborate with Essex County Council (ECC) on a procurement exercise for a Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) subject to comparative costing with current system and to undertake further competition via the DPS to award contracts for Children’s home to school transport as set out in section 3.**
- 1.2 Children’s Overview and Scrutiny recommend Cabinet agree that the Director of Children’s Services, in consultation with the Education Portfolio Holder is given delegated authority to award contracts following further competitions under the DPS.**

28. Work Programme

The Vice Chair requested a briefing note prior to the next meeting on the issue of RAAC in schools. An update report on RAAC is also required to be added to the January meeting.

The meeting finished at 9.03 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

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