

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 12 December 2017 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Bukky Okunade (Chair), Graham Snell (Vice-Chair), Gary Collins, David Potter, Joycelyn Redsell and Luke Spillman

Lynda Pritchard, Church of England Representative

Apologies: Myra Potter, Parent Government Representative

In attendance: Councillor James Halden, Portfolio Holder for Education and Health
George Wright, Youth Cabinet Chair
Gill Burns, Deputy Director for NELFT
Sharon Hall, Area Manager for NELFT
Rory Patterson, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director of Children's Services
Tim Elwell-Sutton, Assistant Director and Consultant in Public Health
Roger Edwardson, Interim Strategic Leader School Improvement, Learning and Skills
Sue Green, Strategic Leader Early Years, Families & Communities
Malcolm Taylor, Strategic Lead - Learner Support
Alan Cotgrove, Business Manager, Local Safeguarding Children's Board
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.

64. Minutes

The minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10 October 2017 were approved as a correct record.

65. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

66. Declaration of Interests

The Church of England Representative (CER), Lynda Pritchard, declared a non-pecuniary interest that she worked for a private fostering agency and was also the safeguarding officer at the primary school she worked at.

67. Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board

The Business Manager for the Local Safeguarding Children Board (BMLSCB), Alan Cotgrove, provided a verbal update to the Committee in which he stated that the new Children and Social Work Act 2017 would dissolve the current Local Safeguarding Children Board's (LSCB) responsibilities and would require new safeguarding arrangements to be put in place.

The legislation changed the statutory agencies down to three, from five, which would now consist of the Local Authority, the police and the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). It removed Probation and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) but they would still form part of the safeguarding partnerships.

A small strategic group of the new partners had been set up to agree the new arrangements. Further guidance would be available from April 2018 following the submission of an implementation plan to the Department for Education (DfE) for approval. From there, the LSCB would cease to exist. The BMLSCB would prepare a more detailed report for the next Committee meeting.

Currently, the LSCB was undertaking three serious case reviews and one management case, all which would be published anonymously to protect the children's identities. Case one was in the final stage of completion with a draft report ready which related to child abuse; case two would have drafts ready for boards soon and related to neglect; and case three had just been implemented which related to sexual abuse. The management review related to the health needs of Children Looked After (CLA).

Learning outcomes from the cases were shared with partners where it was relevant. The LSCB had published a case back in June, in which the child had passed away. A learning event had been set up back in November and had been well attended by practitioners. The process had proved to be successful and would be continued.

The BMLSCB intended to bring an annual report to the next Children's Services Committee meeting and requested this to be on the work programme for 13th February 2018.

The Chair asked for clarity on what the LSCB's position would be when the new legislation would come into place. THE BMLSCB confirmed that safeguarding boards would not exist under the new arrangements. The content and approach of the current Thurrock LSCB would be taken into the new framework alongside other identified needs.

Councillor Spillman queried the process of investigating serious cases and how cases were decided as serious. A set criteria was in place for serious cases which included circumstances where a child had passed away, been severely neglected or sexually assaulted. Alongside these criterias, the information obtained from agencies would also be considered to decide a serious case.

The Chair looked forward to the annual report at the next Committee meeting in February 2018. She queried the timeframe of six months to respond to the new legislation in April 2018. The BMLSCB confirmed that they would be given a timeframe of six to nine months to implement the new framework for safeguarding.

The BMLSCB left the meeting at 7.16pm.

68. Youth Cabinet Update

The Youth Cabinet Chair (YCC), George Wright, spoke of the recent Annual Youth Conference which had taken place the week before. It was the fourth one the Youth Cabinet had held so far. Workshops had included Curriculum for Life and First Aid from St John's Ambulance. Nine secondary schools had attended resulting in 100 students participating in workshops. There had been two main debates with one of them about the Curriculum for Life.

From the conference, a few big campaigns had been brought forward which included bullying and littering. The Youth Cabinet intended to work with schools on these campaigns.

The Chair congratulated the success of the conference which she had attended and had found the debates at the conference interesting, in particular, the topic on life skills. Councillor Redsell echoed this and asked what the Youth Cabinet intended to do with top topics of money and life skills which had been from last year's consultation. The YCC agreed money and life skills had come out on top for the second time and last year, headteachers had signed up to implement these issues in their schools. Some schools offered life skills up to a certain age and some did not. The Youth Cabinet would need to look into which schools needed these topics implemented.

Members further discussed the importance of young people receiving life skills learning which would prepare them for life after 18 years old. Many were not used to the environment after this age which resulted in debts and bankruptcy. The Chair asked Officers to take comments into consideration to help young people.

The Chair had agreed for agenda item 10 to be moved up the agenda as the next item.

69. Pilot Development of Head Start Housing for Care Leavers & Vulnerable Young People

The Portfolio Holder for Education and Health, Councillor Halden, presented the report which outlined how Thurrock Council would support young people after they left care, in finding suitable housing accommodation. A pilot scheme was developed, Head Start Housing for Care Leavers, which was in partnership with Inspire to address the housing issues that young care leavers

faced. Two further developments were also created which were house of multiple occupancy (HMOs).

This pilot scheme has already helped to save up to £84,000 and would avoid spot placements which often happened when leaving care and was costly. The safety of young care leavers was paramount and aimed to be as flexible as possible to all young care leavers. Criminal offenders would not be eligible for the scheme. The scheme would run for 24 months with reviews taking place within the 6th, 12th and 18th month which would also discuss other plans such as debt management or education. Councillor Halden felt the scheme was positive and praised the Children's Services department on their work on care leaver housing issues.

Councillor Spillman welcomed the scheme as it brought departments together which he felt had become too compartmentalised. Councillor Halden agreed that compartmentalisation was not good and said that some of the impacts from this had been quite significant. He hoped the departments would be able to operate from a common middle ground with this scheme.

Councillor Spillman questioned what the team for this scheme comprised of. The Corporate Director for Children's Services (CDCS), Rory Patterson, replied that advisors had been specifically recruited for children in care. A variety of skillsets had helped to bring the team together enabling them to be successful in their work. Councillor Spillman further questioned the number of workers and caseloads that was currently being handled. The CDCS would provide details in an email.

The CER congratulated the Children's Services department on their work and welcomed the scheme. Echoing this, the YCC thought the scheme was innovative and would ensure young care leavers were supported. He went on to ask for clarity on paragraphs 2.9, in particular, the reference, 'hand in hand with support work being undertaken with the Inspire team', and 2.4 which he thought was in regards to additional support. Councillor Halden confirmed that 2.9 referred to council tax exemption for care leavers aged 18 – 21 and in exceptional circumstances, up to 25 years old. The support offer from Inspire was all inclusive which meant that any young person walking into the Inspire hub could receive advice on anything from CVs to debts. The 'hand in hand' support from the Inspire team referred to providing young care leavers with housing advice in partnership with the housing team.

The YCC asked for further clarity on whether the support from Inspire would end when young care leavers gained the council tax exemption. Councillor Halden stated this would not be the case and that the support offer would continue regardless. The CDCS added that support from Inspire would continue up until the age of 25.

Referring to paragraph 2.8, Councillor Redsell asked for clarity on the sentence, 'support to our young people in the care system who are 17' as she thought it would not just be 17 year olds. She went on to ask what the aftercare team was and what exceptional circumstances constituted council

tax exemption. Councillor Halden replied that 2.8 referred to future developments regarding transitional support and recognised that some young people would need support before leaving care due to instability. The 17 year old age group was the transitional period of leaving care. Councillor Redsell went on to ask if young people at 18 years of age, after leaving for university, would be allowed to return to their foster home if they wanted to. Councillor Halden confirmed that this option was still in place. He went on to say that the council tax exemptions were down to officers in the department to assess cases and make their own decisions without having to go through long processes.

The Vice-Chair queried why the timeframe for the scheme only ran for 24 months which he felt was quite short. He also asked what happened to young care leavers after the scheme ended for them. Councillor Halden replied that they currently had 42 17 year olds in the scheme and the 24 month timeframe would ensure there was a turnover in the scheme and that young people could be moved on when they were ready. The work was designed to ensure young people felt safe and build upon what they needed. The reviews at the 6th, 12th and 18th month would ensure young care leavers would transition out of care smoothly. During this period, the housing tenancy would look into each young care leaver's case on their eligibility for housing which meant they would not have to apply for housing tenancy. This process ensured the planning would be there.

Councillor Collins thanked Councillor Halden on joining the departments to work together in this scheme. He queried the sustainability of the project due to Councillor Halden's earlier comment on the current number of 42 17 year olds in the scheme and asked if this was the maximum number that could enter the scheme at a time. Councillor Halden clarified that the number given was what was currently in the scheme, not the maximum amount. The scheme ensured no one would fall through the net and would receive the support they needed.

Members discussed a motion on council tax age exemption that had been presented at the last Full Council meeting on 29th November 2017. This also concerned other departments within the Council and Councillor Halden pointed out that council tax exemption would not be the only support to young care leavers. They would need support in other matters as well. Some of the Members felt that the proposal in the report was not in the spirit of the amendment of the motion presented at Full Council. There was not enough information and felt the proposal of the scheme had not been scrutinised enough so therefore, could not agree with some of the recommendations presented. Councillor Halden advised he could provide more information if required and answer more questions.

The Vice-Chair voiced his concern on the 24 month timeframe of the scheme and asked for reassurance that contact would still be in place with young care leavers after the 24 month period. Councillor Halden responded that the scheme would provide young people with a pathway towards the end of their 24 months. Similar to Corporate Parenting Committee, data and cases could

be provided to the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee to show what happened to a young person after leaving care. The CDCS gave reassurance that the service department had a responsibility to ensure young care leavers were not left destitute or homeless after leaving the HMOs scheme. The service department would ensure the young care leaver would be provided with or have found suitable accommodation and continue to receive support until the age of 25 years old.

In regards to the recommendations in the report, Members felt the wording of recommendation 1.4 needed to be amended. This was due to the lack of information given on the age exemption for council tax. With the wording amended for recommendation 1.4, Members agreed on the recommendations.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee note and provide comments on the pilot HMO and support the ongoing development of the programme to enable more properties to be available for the scheme.**
- 2) That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee support the development of a transitional housing scheme and would provide personalised support for young people as they enter the aftercare service.**
- 3) That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee note and make comments on a more joint working approach between Social Care and Housing to improve the offer to care leavers.**
- 4) That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the proposal to exempt Care Leavers from Council Tax and receive additional information regarding options for the above and to make recommendations.**

Councillor Halden left the meeting at 8.17pm.

70. Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Service Presentation

The North East London Foundation Trust (NELFT) representatives gave a presentation on the Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Service (EWMHS) which had gone through a service transformation to bring all the organisations related to mental health and wellbeing under one model. This removed many barriers to enable all staff to become part of one pathway to make a more agile model.

With this new model, it created a single point of access (SPA) to ensure help was offered early on and that referrals were allocated to a locality team. From the performance data, it could be seen that the caseload for Thurrock had

increased by 267% from November 2015 – November 2017 which indicated that people were becoming more aware of the service. Many of these referrals had come from a parent/carer/relative. The timeframe for assessment of cases ranged from 8 to 18 weeks.

The Chair was pleased to see the team building upon its capacity and asked for clarification on the wait times for treatment. The Area Manager for NELFT (AMNELFT), Sharon Hall, stated that the longest waiting time was 21 weeks but this was reducing overtime. The Deputy Director for NELFT (DDNELFT), Gill Burns, added that the EWMHS received a lot of requests around Looked After Children (LAC) which providers were able to do but the system could not keep up. To remedy this, telephone consultations were provided.

Councillor Redsell praised the report but hoped this new model worked in real life and not just on paper. She expressed concern on putting a label of mental health on children as at times, this may not be the case. The DDNELFT shared a case of complaint in which a child had been diagnosed with a mental health issue upon the insistence of their parents. The Committee discussed the complexity and issues of mental health labelling. Councillor Redsell pointed out that once a child was given a mental health diagnosis, this would stick with them for life so felt children should not be diagnosed so early on in life. NELFT went on to discuss some cases of this that had circulated around the social media websites. The AMNELFT encouraged the Committee to read the green paper that had recently been published on the mental wellbeing of pupils in schools.

Councillor Spillman brought up the use of drugs to cure mental illness and said that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and group therapy could cure mental illnesses. He asked what facilities were available for talk therapy instead of drug prescriptions. The DDNELFT responded that evidence around the success of using CBT and other similar therapies were vague. Instead, there was strong evidence around the success of the use of other treatments which were more favourable to use in the course of the treatment of mental illnesses. Councillor Spillman expressed his concern on the lack of facilities to treat those with mental health issues which he worried would become a part of the criminal justice system. The NELFT representatives stated they were turning this around in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) by bringing in the EWMHS. They aimed to ensure mental health issues were a priority by providing more investment into emotional wellbeing.

Councillor Collins asked whether emotional wellbeing life skills were taught in schools to which the AMNELFT replied that it was down to schools to provide these. The Strategic Lead for Learner Support (SLLS), Malcolm Taylor, added that there was also a wider range of programmes in addition to emotional wellbeing, as part of the Collaborative Commissioning Forum, which was being rolled out to schools. There were also a range of other activities including digital portals to support resilience in mental health issues. Referring to pathology, he said that many psychiatrists and mental health professionals would avoid going down the pathology route unnecessarily. They would take into consideration background and parental factors when assessing mental

health issues before giving medication. He also mentioned other services such as the Youth Preventative Services which could help to tackle issues at the early stages. These would be taken into consideration when schools would be briefed.

The YCC thanked NELFT for their work and said that the Youth Cabinet had worked with NELFT in the past. He hoped to work more with NELFT in the future in raising mental health awareness in schools.

The YCC left the meeting at 9.00pm.

Referring to page 14 of the presentation, the Chair asked for clarification on what the National Code: 19 meant. The AMNELFT believed it was a code that referred to LAC but would check and let the Committee know.

The NELFT representatives left the meeting at 9.03pm.

71. A Sustainable Children's Social Care System for the Future: Annual Public Health Report 2017

Presented by the Assistant Director and Consultant in Public Health (ADCPH), Tim Elwell-Sutton, the report focussed on creating a sustainable children's social care system for the future. There were growing pressures on the current system due to the increasing population with the number of special needs and asylum seeking children increasing. Financial pressures were on Children's Services and the proportion spent on preventative areas had decreased. Figures from 2006 - 2016 showed the population growth rate for children in Thurrock was 13% whereas the national average was 6%.

Councillor Spillman asked if Thurrock's rate of child population were still higher than the national average per 100 or 1000 children to which the ADCPH confirmed it was. Councillor Collins also asked what the reasons were for the increase. This was due to Thurrock's young population which meant a fertile population and an economically growing population also meant more people moving into the borough. The service to prevent children from going into care was unable to keep up with the growing demand, therefore, spending in this service was increasing.

At 9.15pm, Members agreed to suspend standing orders until 10.00pm in order to go through all items on the agenda.

Continuing with the report, the ADCPH stated that the underlying pressures to the current children's social care system would remain but there were strategic recommendations to cope with this. The three strategic recommendations outlined in the report were:

1. Make a long-term strategic commitment to invest in prevention.
2. Invest in the most effective preventative services.
3. Improve information on activity and spending.

Work on a sustainable children's social care system for the future was already underway. To ensure its success, it was important to invest in preventative measures.

Councillor Redsell thought the report was detailed and raised some concerning issues. She referred to the second point on page 35 of appendix 1, which she found to be worrying. The ADCPH replied that the audit had been carried out by iMPower and the result suggested that, if unlimited resources were available, a significant proportion of looked after children might have been prevented from going into care if more support had been given to families at an early stage. Councillor Redsell went on to ask whether cases of where children had been taken into care unnecessarily were investigated. The CDCS answered that the service department were assessing cases where children could return home safely. They had to ensure the right skillset and resources were made available to continue to provide support to children after returning home.

Councillor Spillman questioned whether there was a pressure to take more children into care than needed. The Assistant Director for Children's Care and Targeted Outcomes (ADCCTO), Sheila Murphy, replied that they were looking at models of support and thinking of the strengths within families to keep them together. Support would be gathered through groups to keep children safe and they could not just remove children from families so easily. There were panels and processes to review why children had come into care and possibilities had to be considered for children to go back to families or friends. The ADCPH added that helping families in the early stages could prevent children from going into care.

The Chair commended the ADCPH on the report given and felt it was well-detailed. She asked if it would be made available to all Councillors as they should all be made aware of the report. The ADCPH confirmed it would be going to Full Council.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the contents and recommendations of the report be noted by the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**

Councillor Redsell and the ADCPH left the meeting at 9.28pm.

72. Information on Adoption and Permanency

The ADCCTO gave an outline of the report which looked at achieving timely adoption decisions and placements. From the Ofsted children's services inspection in March 2016, further work was required to improve the timeliness of adoptions for children. The number of adoptions was low with 10 children adopted last year and a projected number of 9 to be adopted in the current year. The reasons for the delays were due to:

- Chelmsford Court did not have enough judges to decide on cases;

- Essex judgements which saw children being placed into adoption placements too quickly despite the birth mother wanting to appeal.

Adoption and permanency tracking systems were introduced as a result which had significantly improved the timeliness of adoptions.

Councillor Spillman queried whether it was the lack of parents available to adopt children. The ADCCTO stated this was not the case as it was due to the adoption process which went through a specific care plan. The courts would grant a placement if there were absolutely no other options available for the child. Practises had changed around assessing family members and friends as well.

The CER questioned the numbers within the post adoption team to which the ADCCTO replied that the numbers would be sent round to the Committee. The CER also asked if the team was new as the report stated that it was too early to assess the impact of the post adoption team's services. The ADCCTO said the team had been reconfigured but would be able to pass on more details to the Committee.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the difficulties and challenges the adoption service is facing in getting children adopted.**

73. Delivery of Inclusion Units and Alternative Provision Reform

The report was presented by the Interim Strategic Leader School Improvement, Learning and Skills (ISLSILS), Roger Edwardson, which outlined the investment into Thurrock's schools to open referral units to keep young people in school. This was following the closure of the Primary Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) at Corve Lane. Small inclusion units provided the Council with the opportunity to educate pupils at risk of permanent exclusion and those who had been permanently excluded. It would also ensure fewer children would be excluded from primary schools in the future.

Referring to the Olive Alternative Provision Academy's two terms to enable pupils to return to mainstream school, the CER asked what the contingency plan was if children could not return after two terms. The ISLSILS answered that the two terms were in place to ensure children's education did not stagnate. The SLLS added that some of the children would be on Special Educational Needs (SEN) support. If children were unable to return to mainstream school after the end of the two terms, other resources would be considered.

Councillor Spillman queried on who had been in control of the PRU. This had been under the Olive Trust but Ofsted did not feel it had performed well. Under Ofsted's judgement, the primary provision had been closed down. Councillor Spillman went on to ask whether there was any concern on the lack

of responsibility in academy systems. The ISLSILS said the Council's relationship with the academies in Thurrock was good and that the service department's actions were to inform Ofsted on any concerns. The SLLS also stated that some of the work within the primary schools was of high standard. The service department would continue to monitor the work.

Councillor Collins said the academy system was robust and were able to resolve problems as they occurred. The ISLSILS added that there were good and outstanding schools within the Borough. The PRU had been the worst performing institution which was why the new provision in East Tilbury Primary School, was put in. The Jack Lumley site was also promising which was the right solution to encourage children to stay in mainstream education.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee note and provide comments on the planned changes in provision for children at risk of permanent exclusion or who have been permanently excluded.**

74. Fees and Charges Pricing Strategy 2018 / 19

The CDCS presented the report which set out the charges in relation to Children's Services. Not many fees fell under this service department but some of the fees included Grangewaters and nursery provisions.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Childrens Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the revised fees and charges proposals including those no longer applicable.**
- 2) That the Childrens Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee comment on the proposals currently being considered within the remit of this Committee.**
- 3) That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee note that it may be necessary to adjust the relevant fees and charges during the year to reflect a change to their cost recoverability calculation, as**
 - legally prescribed statutory fees and charges may be subject to prescribed variation during the year, and that**
 - discretionary services provided on a traded basis for profit may be subject to commercial operational considerations.**

75. Children's Social Care Performance

The CDCS presented the report which outlined the high level of demand within the children's social care service. There were downward trends in managing the system and considerable work had been undertaken to manage the demand through improving its early intervention service. The demand rates were reducing but required more work to be done.

Members felt they needed more time to comment on the report and asked for it to be moved up on the agenda for the next Committee meeting.

Item deferred to the next Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 13th February 2018.

76. Ofsted Inspection Action Plan - Update

Item deferred to the next Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 13th February 2018.

77. Work Programme

Members discussed the work programme for 13th February 2018 and agreed to move the Social Care Performance item up the agenda to allow sufficient time to discuss it. The Ofsted Action Plan Update was added to the work programme and two reports – Fostering Recruitment and Brighter Futures Service would be deferred to the next meeting in the new municipal year of 2018 – 2019.

The meeting finished at 10.00 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**