

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 6 June 2018 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Joycelyn Redsell (Chair), Graham Hamilton (Vice-Chair), Qaisar Abbas, Barry Johnson and Steve Liddiard

Gregg Brown, Thurrock Open Door Representative
Jackie Howell, Chair of The One Team, Foster Carer Association
Joseph Kaley, Children in Care Council
Sharon Smith, Vice Chair of The One Team, Foster Carers Association

Apologies: Councillors Abbie Akinbohun and Angela Sheridan

In attendance: Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director Children's Care and Targeted Outcomes
Janet Simon, Strategic Lead, Looked After Children
Keeley Pullen, Head Teacher for the Virtual School
Kallum Davies, Democratic Services Officer
Jenny Shade, 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.

1. Minutes

The Minutes of Corporate Parenting Committee, held on 7 March 2018, were approved as a correct record.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

Councillor Liddiard declared a non-pecuniary interest in respect of Agenda Items 5 through to 7 as he was a foster carer.

4. Information on recent External Placements for Young People

Janet Simon, Strategic Lead for Children Looked After presented the report which provided an update on and an overview of placement activities in the period of 2017/18.

The officer highlighted key areas of the report and informed members that there had been a reduction in the number of looked after children this year and that this was largely attributed to the reduction in Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) remaining in borough.

The officer explained that this period had continued the consistent decrease in UASC placed in Thurrock and that this is due to the Eastern Region Protocol. The Eastern Region Protocol sees local authorities allocated an “.07” number, which determined the number of UASC that can reasonably be accommodated in borough, and as Thurrock was above this number, further UASC were distributed amongst the neighbouring local authorities.

She further briefed the Committee that:

- The majority of Children Looked After were in foster care placement, and a focus had been placed on the recruitment of additional foster carers.
- There had been stabilisation in the use of residential placements and an emphasis had been placed on the review of the suitability of these placements and whether the needs of the young people could be better met in foster care.
- The service was continuing to work closely with the Finance Team to keep costs within budget and ensure value for money.

The Chair questioned why only 11 young people “stay put” in placement and commented that this number seemed low. The officer stated that the service actively encouraged young people to stay in placement however it was not always appropriate for them to do so. She further explained that a common factor was the desire for independence in the age group but agreed that she would like to see an increase in this figure and this was being looked into by the Permanency Panel.

The Chair stated that independence was a desire across the board for this age group, however the majority of non-looked after young people could not afford independent living and were therefore remaining in the family home much longer.

The officer agreed with this assessment and expanded on the efforts her team made to encourage “staying put”. She highlighted the “Pathway Plan” which looked at the skills required for living independently and also noted that all looked after young people should have savings as part of their plan. The officer further added that foster carers are encouraged to educate their charge in skills through chores such as cleaning and laundry.

The officer stated that with regard to facilitating the permanency of placement, young people should be challenged on their vision of independent living, and provided a “reality check” around the difficulties they will face. She explained that the benefit afforded to such young people amounts to £57.90 and educating young people about having to manage such a tight budget was a key means to encouraging them to stay in placement.

Councillor Hamilton questioned whether £57.90 was the sum total afforded to young people leaving care or if this was separate from Housing Benefits. The officer clarified that young people would receive Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support in addition to this amount, but the £57.90 would need to cover all utility bills and general costs of living.

Councillor Abbas questioned why if some foster carers were able to take more than one young person, these carers were not given more than one. The officer explained that often it can be detrimental to the children or young people currently in the placement to introduce another before they are settled and the effects of this were a consideration before placing an additional young person. She also added that there were occasions where it was not appropriate to mix some young people such as where there had been trauma or additional support needs.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Lead for Children Looked After and moved to the recommendation that members noted the report.

RESOLVED:

The Corporate Parenting Committee noted the report.

5. Briefing Note - Attainment of Children Looked After 2017 Validated Data

Keeley Pullen, Head Teacher for Virtual Schools introduced the briefing note explaining that it had been historically presented based on indicative data, however she was now able to present the information based on validated data provided by the Department for Education.

The officer stated that overall Thurrock's Children Looked After (CLA) had performed better in all areas compared to the 2016 validated data. When comparing Thurrock CLA to a range of other CLA groups for national, regional and the top 5 closest statistical neighbours, Thurrock's pupils performed better. She added that this demonstrated an improvement in outcomes for our most vulnerable pupils with very good rates of progression.

The officer stated that Thurrock CLA had performed better in Progress 8 and Attainment 8 when compared to other CLA groups. The gap against Non-Looked After was closing, however, this was still an area for improvement.

Councillor Hamilton questioned whether the term "cohort" in the reports referred to a population sample. The officer clarified that the figure was the actual number of pupils.

Councillor Hamilton asked what the dates were for the Academic Year. Pullen The officer stated that the Academic Year ran from 1 September to 20 July this year, although the latter date varied slightly each year.

The Chair thanked the Head Teacher for Virtual Schools for the briefing and noted its contents.

6. Social Care Development Plan: CLA Progress Report

The Strategic Lead for Children Looked After introduced the report, providing a summary of the Children Looked After service and highlighted key areas within the service.

The officer explained that focus was on the recruitment, approval and training of foster carers who are willing to offer placement to children looked after while maintaining and expanding the capacity of existing foster carers. This was being achieved by working with the Communications Team to reach interested residents in the borough. She added that as an extension of this there was also a focus on increasing the number of children looked after staying in placement after turning 16.

The officer clarified to the Committee that “private fostering” was when a child under the age of 16 (under 18 if disabled) was cared for by someone who was not their parent or a 'close relative'. This was a private arrangement made between a parent and a carer, for 28 days or more. Close relatives were defined as step-parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, uncles or aunts. She advised that there was an awareness campaign and action plan for private fostering and this had seen an increase in the number of notifications received as well as general enquires. This allowed for an assessment to be completed by the service which focused on the needs of the child and the identified private foster carer.

The officer stated that there was an important emphasis on the voices of children looked after and that their opinions and wishes were consistently considered at all stages.

The Chair thanked the officer and asked to see more evidence in future reports of the opinions and wishes of the children looked after influencing decisions as this would benefit Members as Corporate Parents. The officer agreed to bring this item back to the next meeting of the Committee as an opportunity for children looked after to present their views on their placements and make their thoughts known to the Members.

The Chair questioned if in addition to support groups provided to foster carers, if there were any made available to parents whose children had been moved into care. The Strategic Lead agreed to look into this and bring the item back at the next meeting of the Committee, stating that there was counselling available however there was a low uptake of the service. She added that the service was looking into gathering feedback from parents following the process of their children becoming looked after to assess what the parents had learnt. This was with a view to “breaking the cycle” and helping parents develop the skills and understanding to care for their children in the future.

RESOLVED:

The Corporate Parenting Committee noted the report.

Councillor Liddiard leaves the meeting (7.48pm)

7. Children's Social Care Performance

Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director for Children's Services introduced the report, explaining that Thurrock had experienced a high level of demand placed on its statutory social care service for children, and considerable work had been undertaken by the department in managing this demand. This had seen a reduction in the number of contacts and referrals; easing the demand pressure of children becoming looked after and children being placed on a child protection plan.

The officer reported that all indicators had shown improvement and the service was coming in line with statistical neighbours.

Councillor Hamilton questioned what was considered to be a statistical neighbour. The officer explained that they were local authorities around the country which were identified as being similar to Thurrock in terms of size and demographic.

Councillor Hamilton asked who specifically were our statistical neighbours. The officer stated that Medway, Bexley, Havering, Dudley, Telford & Wrekin, Swindon, Southend, Sheffield, Peterborough and Derby were Thurrock's Statistical Neighbours.

RESOLVED:

The Corporate Parenting Committee noted the report.

8. Work Programme

Councillor Johnson requested a report be added to the Work Programme covering the current and projected spend in the area on Children's Services. The Assistant Director of Children's Services agreed that the report would cover placement costs and a broad overview of spend on Children Looked After.

Councillor Redsell asked that her earlier request for a record of the views and wishes of children looked after be added to the Work Programme. The Assistant Director agreed this will be added.

The meeting finished at 7.55pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk