

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 2 June 2020 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Joycelyn Redsell (Chair), Steve Liddiard (Vice-Chair), Abbie Akinbohun, Daniel Chukwu, Barry Johnson, Sue MacPherson, Sue Shinnick and Jennifer Smith

Rafael Antunes, Chair, Children in Care Council
Christopher Bennett, Vice Chair, Children in Care Council
Annie Guidotti, Thurrock Open Door
Jackie Howell, Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association
Sharon Smith, Vice Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association

In attendance: Councillor James Halden, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and Adult Social Care
Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Joe Tynan, Assistant Director of Children's Services
Janet Simon, Strategic Lead, Looked After Children
Carrie Bacon, After Care Team - Team Manager
Miss C Greenaway, Care Leaver Representative
Mandy Moore, Strategic Lead - Business Intelligence
Keeley Pullen, Head Teacher for Virtual School
Miss S Stone, Care Leaver Representative
Kenna-Victoria Healey, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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

1. Minutes

The minutes of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 3 March 2020 were approved as a correct record.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interests.

4. Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and Adult Social Care Update

Councillor Halden Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and Adult Social Care, thanked the Chair for allowing him to attend the meeting to update Members on the work of his Portfolio.

During his presentation Councillor Halden stated it was his first Corporate Parenting meeting since he had taken over as Cabinet Holder for Social Care at the start of March. He commented that coming out of Covid-19 officers were still as ambitious as they were before and certainly not letting it get in the way of wanting to achieve the commitments made.

He continued to advise the two main areas in which he wished to focus on over the coming months were mobility and vulnerability. Mobility to keep looked after children well and support them achieve their ambitions, and at the same time looking at the change in profile of vulnerability.

Councillor Halden observed in terms of vulnerability from recent inspections Thurrock was a safe borough and as such, didn't want to become complacent so he had requested an independent review of the local safe guarding children partnership arrangements. This was to ensure that if the council was to have a serious event that the council investigated in a timely manner and secondly he wanted to make sure that the partnership had enough capacity, that it was not just the serious events that trigger a statutory threshold, that were investigated but the wider events; so to see what else we can learn with our partners.

In addition officers were working together with the Police and Crime Commissioner, to find ways to better integrate the youth offending service and other services across the system.

The Portfolio Holder moved on to mention the Council had been rated through Ofsted as good, Officers were now pushing forward to be outstanding. It was explained this meant the Council improved on getting transitions right and making sure that it's young people were put in the position where they could achieve their ambitions when they left care and not simply just going through the motions of them going through the system.

Finally he mentioned one of the areas he wanted to consider more closely was working with the council's partners in Fostering and Adoption, and wider to consider the standards to hold themselves to. He continued to state the council had some brilliant figures coming out from the Covid -19 crisis, 94.5% of all looked after children had had their visits completed within time scales. However there had been other figures which were not as good for example, only 58% of pathway plans were completed in April, so he had asked to have wide partnership discussions about the standards to apply to ourselves because ultimately everything the council did for this young people, should be about how positively the council was impacting the life chances of young people and not simply processing them through the system.

The Chair of the Committee, thanked Councillor Halden for this update and sought if the Committee had any questions.

Councillor Akinbohun firstly thanked the Portfolio Holder for his update. She then queried as to how badly Covid-19 had affected the councils Looked After Children.

Councillor Halden stated that Covid-19 had affected every part of society, however one of the things he was proud of was what the team had achieved, with both Social Workers in the council and Foster Carers in trying to maintain normality. He continued by mentioning the work of the virtual school has done a marvel of things over the last few weeks.

The Portfolio Holder commented officers had made sure all of the internal systems were still working, and all working together. It was important to make sure the financial resilience was in place, so as lockdown was starting to be lifted, should there be another wave Covid-19 the Councils Looked After Children would have the support and advice they needed.

5. Children's Social Care Performance

The Strategic Lead for Business Intelligence introduced the report to Members providing a summary of the Children's Social Care performance. During which the Committee heard how in some instances when contact progressed to a referral, there may be the need for Social Care intervention, this would be when there were more serious concerns about a child's safety or wellbeing. In Quarter 4, Thurrock received 760 referrals compared to 603 in the same quarter of 2018-2019.

She continued to advise Members in 2019-20 a total of 4,116 assessments were completed compared to 3,180 in 2018-19. This was an increase of 29.4%. The number of assessments completed within 45 working days has remained consistent since 2018-19.

The Strategic Lead for Business Intelligence explained at the end of Quarter 4, the total number of children subject to a Child Protection Plan was 173 and the rate per 10,000 was 39.5. Although, this was the highest figure reported in the last 12 months, it reflected a trend towards higher levels of risk factors within cases referred to Children's Social Care. Members heard how Child Protection Plans were regularly reviewed by the Strategic Lead to ensure that risk was being well managed and that children do not remain subject to Plans for longer than necessary.

Members were notified that in Quarter 4, the number of Children Looked After was 298 which was slightly up from 287 in Quarter 3, representing an increase of 3.8% and compared to 2018-19, there has been a slight increase of 1.7%.

It was mentioned that as per the table in the report, in March 2020, 9 children in total went missing with 27 episodes. It was highlighted that it was important to bear in mind that the same child often goes missing more than once.

The Chair of the Committee enquired as to whether Care Leavers were given money advice. Officers confirmed that all Care Leavers had a Personal Adviser to give any support and assistance needed.

Miss Stone, a Care Leaver Representative commented that since she had left the care system, she hadn't received any support or assistance despite seeking for help. She further commented that she was passed through the care system and moved around a lot. Members requested that Miss Stone's case was reviewed and someone contact her to offer the support she was seeking.

Councillor Akinbohun sought clarity on the number of missing child and whether they were found and back with their families. Officers confirmed that all children were now back home with their families and were only missing for a number hours.

The Vice Chair of the Children in Care Council asked why is was young people had to have a health assessment. Officers explained it was a general assessment, so to have a better understanding of a young person's health such as asthma, diabetes or any allergies. The Vice Chair of the Children in Care Council commented that when going in to care a child's whole life changes and he felt that the assessment was intrusive.

Councillor MacPherson commented that she felt it would be worth looking into how the health assessment was explained, so to ensure that the young people fully understood what was going to happened and the reason why.

RESOLVED

- 1. That Members noted areas of improvement in Children's Social Care and work undertaken to manage demand for statutory social care services.**
- 2. For any specific areas of interest to be flagged for inclusion/expansion within the next report.**

6. Update on Ofsted Recommendation - Timeliness of Initial Health Assessments

The Strategic Lead for Children Looked After presented the report to the Committee and in doing explained that when a child or young person came into care, they would have an Initial Health Assessment. This was a statutory health assessment, and the assessment is to be completed within 28 days of the child coming into care.

Members were informed that a paediatrician or an appropriately trained medical practitioner completes the health assessment. The Initial Health Assessment identifies any existing health problems and deficits in previous healthcare and provides a baseline for managing the child's future health needs.

The Chair of the Committee thanked Officers for the report, she stated that she was going to raise the subject at the next meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Akinbohun queried as to why for March 2020 only 74% of initial health assessments had taken place within the 28day deadline, given they could have arrived from another country. Officers explained any unaccompanied asylum seeking children were to have an initial health assessment in the same way any child who has entered the care system. They would also be registered with a local GP and or local hospital if required.

The Strategic Lead for Children Looked After continued to explain the reasoning behind the 74% was down to the capacity of the Health service and also some children were placed outside of the Local Authority.

RESOLVED

That Corporate Parenting Members were informed about Health and Children's Services efforts to improve the timeliness of Initial Assessments for Children Looked After.

7. Support Provided to Foster Carers during Covid-19

The Strategic Lead for Children Looked After addressed Members advising them that Thurrock Council was a Fostering Agency registered with Ofsted, therefore they approved, monitored and supported Foster Carers who in turn supported the Children in their care.

Members heard how Foster carers usually received a package of practical and financial support to meet the needs of these children. The non-financial support included:

- Regular Face to Face Supervision with a qualified Social Worker
- Training relevant to their role
- An out of hours phone line to provide advice and support at evenings and weekend

The Committee were further informed the Councils approach had been to provide services as usual to Foster Carers who continued to care for children during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was explained that on the 24th April 2020 the government amended the regulated duties to Looked After Children via The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020.

The Vice-Chair of the One Team, Foster Carer Association commented there had been a lot to consider throughout lockdown, such as, contact between the children they looked after and their parents as well as keeping their own families safe.

The Chair of the One Team, Foster Carer Association agreed stating the last few months had had a big impact on their families, along with the young

people they looked after. She continued by notifying the committee she had been home educating her young person, as difficult as it was to make that decision, it was best for her as it helped to ease her worries regarding covid-19.

Councillor Redsell, thanked the Foster Carers for their hard work in looking after the Councils young people.

It was sought by Members as to the support given to Foster Carers throughout the covid-19 pandemic. Officers explained they were continuing to give their Foster Carers all of the support they would usually receive, albeit sometimes remotely. This included shopping should anyone be shielding or providing the funds for young people to purchase bikes, not to mention emotional support was also given.

The Vice-Chair of the One Team, Foster Carer Association confirm she continued to receive support from the team at the Council and also the virtual school, to make home lessons fun for the children they were teaching, such as activities which could be held outside rather than all indoors.

RESOLVED:

That Corporate Parenting Members were informed about the support given to Foster Carers approved by Thurrock Council during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

8. Support provided to Care Leavers and Children Looked After during COVID-19

The Strategic Lead for Children Looked After introduced the report to the committee explaining that on the 24th April 2020 the Government amended the regulated duties to Looked After Children via The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020. This legislation reduced the Councils obligations in a number of areas, and the changes were temporary until 25th September 2020. Key changes were:

- The duty for Social Workers to undertake visits to Children in Care at least six-weekly had been temporarily removed, and could now be completed virtually via video or phone call, rather than face-to-face.
- Children Looked After reviews did not have to be completed six-monthly. Previously the law required an Independent Review of each Child in Care every six months.

Members heard how the current pandemic had introduced new elements of risk for everyone. During which the Local Authority had considered new ways of working to ensure that statutory duties were continued to be fulfilled and the Children and Young People in its care were safe and appropriately supported.

Officers continued to advise the report outlined actions taken by Children's Social Care to address the needs for Children who are Looked After and

Young People Leaving Care and ensure the best possible support during this difficult and unprecedented time.

The Chair of the Committee thanked the Strategic Lead for Children Looked After for her report. She enquired as to whether there was to be a back log of cases. It was explained it was possible to have a back log of cases, should they require court proceedings as experts were sometimes required. However this had not stopped the progression of adoption, whereby the council was seeking that new parents and the family who were looking after the child were to isolate for 13 days before.

Councillor MacPherson welcomed and thanked officers for the report. She expressed concern over the councils care leavers, who were working 0 hour contracts. Should they not be working at this time, what support was officers offering to make sure they could pay their rent. It was confirmed that officers were offering finance support to those care leavers who required help.

RESOLVED:

That Corporate Parenting Members were informed about support provided to Children Looked After and Care Leavers within the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic.

9. Pupil Premium Plus Report for the Virtual School

The Headteacher of the Virtual School for Children Looked After, presented the report to the Committee and in doing so, she remarked that raising achievement in all areas of education for the Councils Children Looked After remained a key priority for Thurrock Council.

She continued to inform Members the Virtual School monitored and supported the educational progress and outcome for Children Looked After irrespective of where they were placed, in or out of the borough. The Virtual School was responsible for pupils aged between 3 years and 18 years and this included those who had left care during an academic year.

The Headteacher of the Virtual School went on to explain the report detailed the use of Department for Education Pupil Premium Plus Grant for Children Looked After. This grant was allocated for pupils attending schools from Reception through to Year 11.

Members heard how it was the responsibility of the Virtual School Head to allocate and the implementation of the fund for each local authority. The fund was allocated every year at the beginning of the financial year and the Virtual School Head must allocate this funding across a school academic year for every pupil from Reception to year 11.

It was explain that the amount allocated per pupil was £2,300. Thurrock had a clear Pupil Premium Plus policy which was shared with Head Teachers of looked after pupils placed in and out of the borough at the beginning of the

financial and academic year. It was further explained Thurrocks Virtual School allocated £600 per academic term for every looked after child. The remaining £500 was top sliced to pay for services and interventions which supported pupils in the Virtual School.

Councillor Redsell, Chair of the Committee thanked the Headteacher of the Virtual School for her report.

RESOLVED that the Corporate Parenting Committee:

- 1. Noted the budget and spending report for 2019-2020 for Pupil Premium Plus Grant for Children Looked After.**
- 2. Noted the overall spending by schools of the grant.**
- 3. Approved the proposed strategy plan for the Pupil Premium Plus Grant for 2020-2021.**

10. Corporate Parenting Committee Work Programme 2020/2021

The Committee discussed the work programme ahead of the new municipal year. Members agreed to a number of reports being included on the Work Programme.

RESOLVED:

That the Corporate Parenting Committee agreed for the Work Programme to be updated and include the reports discussed throughout the meeting.

The meeting finished at 8.50pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

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