

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 6 October 2020 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Alex Anderson (Chair), Jennifer Smith (Vice-Chair), Abbie Akinbohun, Sara Muldowney, Bukky Okunade and Elizabeth Rigby

Lynda Pritchard, Church of England Representative
Nicola Cranch, Parent Governor Representative
Sally Khawaja, Parent Governor Representative

In attendance: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills
Joseph Tynan, Interim Assistant Director of Children's Services
Lee Henley, Strategic Lead, Information Management
Malcolm Taylor, Strategic Lead for Specialist Provision and Principal Education Psychologist
Wendy Le, Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being live streamed and recorded, with the video recording to be made available on the Council's Youtube channel.

14. Minutes

The minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 7 July 2020 were approved as a true and correct record.

15. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

16. Declaration of Interests

Lynda Pritchard declared that she worked for Thurrock SEND services.

17. Youth Cabinet Verbal Update

The Youth Cabinet Representatives gave an update:

- The 'Make Your Mark' youth consultation (run by the British Youth Council) would now be run online. The focus was to encourage more young people to speak and vote on issues important to them. The Youth Cabinet had debated 41 motions for the youth ballot which would be revealed in November.
- The Youth Cabinet had been working on the 'Curriculum For Life' project and reviving the 'Modular Learning Programme' which were sets of small five minute modules covering a short topic. This

programme would be introduced to schools who could pick the modules they wanted to teach.

Michele Lucas questioned whether there were discussions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on young people. Alicia Jones answered that there had been three top motions that had been put forward. These revolved around young people being part of the COVID-19 recovery plan, the impact of COVID-19 in education and job security for young people. Most of the motions revolved around topics involving the impact or outcome of COVID-19 on young people.

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

Councillor Halden said that Officers and Members were working hard to balance the budget and expected that there would be difficult days ahead due to the current recession. It was expected that there would be an increase in people accessing the care services or entering care so expenses could increase. The Economic Vulnerability Task Force had been working to help frontline services such as Inspire, the early offer of help through the Children's Centres and Youth Offending Service that continued to tackle gang violence and had just appointed a new gang lead in the service.

On top of the £350,000 increase provided to the fostering service back in July, there was also the proposal of a council tax exemption for foster carers. This would highlight the Council's commitment to Thurrock's foster carers and reduce the Council's reliance on external agency workers which would help the budget. The World of Work funding had been restored and the service had been consulting on the Economic Recovery Strategy which considered care leavers and those with learning disabilities so it was not a generic employment strategy. Councillor Halden highlighted the need for Members to work together to direct finances to frontline services and for the vulnerable. The focus on services for children was intensified in these times and not decreased.

The Chair thanked Councillor Halden for providing an update and was pleased to hear the continued commitment to tackling gang violence.

Councillor Muldowney commented that September 2020 government figures had highlighted that more young people had been furloughed as they had been working in sectors most effected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of unemployed young people was likely to rise significantly by Christmas 2020 and Thurrock's unemployment rate was currently at 12%. An external report had stated that Thurrock was one of the most effected by the pandemic as most of Thurrock's jobs were in the most impacted sectors so Thurrock was highlighted as an area that did not recover as rapidly as other areas. She did not feel the Economic Vulnerability Task Force was doing enough and questioned the steps that were being taken to tackle youth unemployment in Thurrock.

Councillor Halden said that detailed briefings were provided in the Economic Vulnerability Task Force and other Members were invited to join. He stated that Thurrock's youth unemployment figure was not 12% and Thurrock's young people 'Not in Employment, Education, Training' (NEET) percentage was around 1.5%, better than the national average. He went on to say that the service had met with the Department for Work and Pensions to discuss the budget process and continued to support the Inspire service despite other Councils decreasing their careers advice service. Inspire provided more than just career advice as it also provided housing advice and mental health advice. He said that new job opportunities would be created through the Local Plan which would be brought forward soon.

Councillor Muldowney agreed that the NEET figure was low but pointed out that 12% of those were claiming benefits which was on the Government's website and that the overall unemployment rate for Thurrock was above the national average. Councillor Halden reiterated that more people would be accessing social care services and urged Members to respond to the Economic Development Strategy Consultation which looked at more than just new job opportunities as it also ensured that young people leaving further education would be supported.

Referring to the Council Tax Exemption scheme, Councillor Okunade sought clarification on whether the scheme had already been agreed. She also questioned how the effectiveness of the scheme would be measured and if it would be a permanent scheme. Councillor Halden confirmed that the Council Tax Exemption scheme had not been agreed yet and would be considered at Cabinet next week. He had announced it in the press as he was the Portfolio Holder and wanted to highlight that it was a big tax exemption for foster carers which very few boroughs in the country did. There would be more details given when the report would be heard later on that evening.

19. Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Partnership - Serious Case Reviews

Sheila Murphy presented the report on behalf of Jane Foster-Taylor (Thurrock Local Safeguarding Partnership). The report, which can be found on pages 17 – 56, was not a report of the Council's but was a report from the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Partnership.

The Chair was pleased to see the learning outcomes from the serious case review. He queried whether a review process was in place to check that the actions and meetings for information sharing were productive. Referring to appendix 2 of the report, Sheila Murphy said that a lead was assigned to each action point and through the LSCP, there was a Learning and Practice Review Group that met regularly with all the agencies and action points were reviewed and reported back to the Management Executive Board of the LSCP which looked at delivery of the action points. There was also the strategic group of the LSCP and if there were issues with delivery, it would be picked up there.

Referring to page 50, paragraph 118, the Chair queried what the service was doing to ensure children's voices were heard. Sheila Murphy answered that children were heard individually through their social workers and for children known to the service, there were Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and Child Protection Officers (CPOs) who met with the children to hear their views. There were also separate services that looked into engagement and participations with children and the Council had a good team that were very active in listening to the children and feeding back to the service. The inspection from Ofsted last year had commented that the service was strong in listening to children and young people and taking action on these.

Councillor Okunade felt sad to hear of the unfortunate death of a child. She noted certain points of interventions within the review and questioned whether the service needed to review their thresholds and interventions at different thresholds. Sheila Murphy said that the case highlighted practice from 6 years ago and Kyle had been subjected to interim care orders when he was born which was one of the highest levels of interventions in the service's thresholds as well as to child protection, children in need and the early help offer. Families usually moved through the thresholds and it was a question of when more serious action was needed where children would be removed from their families. In this case, each involved agency had felt at different times that the family had been improving so had moved through thresholds. Before the death of Sam, the family had been referred back to the statutory intervention of Children's Social Care services where an assessment had begun.

Councillor Okunade queried what influence the Children's Social Care had over GP surgeries and information sharing between them. Sheila Murphy said that the Council worked well with their partner agencies on care plans and there was a process of review in place with IROs and Independent CPOs. Through the LSCP and Brighter Futures Partnership, the agencies had meetings to review the services they had in place and working together. There were clear procedures and policies in place and there was a strong partnership in Thurrock. To ensure services were effective, this was measured through feedback from children and young people and their families to identify any other services that they wished to see.

Councillor Muldowney noted that the action plan had picked up on the learning outcomes from the agencies working together and asked to see the process for the action plan and other updates to be brought back to Committee at a later date to which the Chair agreed. Referring to page 49, paragraph 117, she felt this highlighted the sadness of the situation and questioned what actions would be in place to ensure a similar situation did not occur again where there had been three critical points to intervene to get the provision right but did not happen for different reasons. Sheila Murphy answered that the paragraph highlighted the reason for serious case reviews and that the practice referred to was back in 2015/16. The report highlighted the improvements made to the service since then which had improved the issues that had been raised. These included Signs of Safety which had a graded care profile that also included neglect concerns in families and training was provided for this. The Prevention and Support Service had been

remodelled since 2016 and the service had ensured more social work qualified managers to check on thresholds. Ofsted had noted the remodelling of the past service and was positive about it. An independent regulator had looked at the services in 2019 and seen evidence of improvements including the additional resources that had been implemented into the service between 2017 and 2019.

Councillor Muldowney sought more details on the recommendation that the Thurrock LSCP had considered the audit of the prevention and support service programme. Joe Tynan explained that the audit group was running independent audits in the Thurrock LSCP and the service was also undertaking quality assurance sampling regularly to test the practice. The feedback from these had been positive and showed consistency and these audits would continue.

RESOLVED:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee accepted the recommendations of the Serious Case Review and the resulting Action Plan.

20. 2019/20 Annual Complaints and Representations Report - Children's Social Care

The report, which can be found on pages 57 – 72, was presented by Lee Henley.

The Chair sought clarification on the percentage figures on timeliness on page 62 which showed a 40% drop between 2018/19 and 2019/20. He also asked whether there were any improvements in place. Lee Henley explained there had been a reduction in performance which was based on 7 from 15 complaints that were responded to within the time frame that equated to 47%. This would be an area the service would aim to improve and respond to complaints within the time frame. Reports were provided to management teams to try to improve figures as well.

Councillor Okunade felt the report did not provide information on the nature of the complaints and showed only statistics. She commended the service on the compliments and noted the number of complaints had reduced from the previous year. She noted the savings of £3,600 made through using Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) but questioned the cost of using ADR. Lee Henley answered that the report highlighted areas of complaints on page 65 and that additional details on complaints could be provided in future. Regarding ADR, it required mediation between the Complaints Team, the service area and the complainant to prevent the complaint from escalating which was not a high cost as it normally involved 1 or 2 hours of Officer time.

Referring to page 65, Councillor Rigby queried the increase in 2020 for the Children Looked After Team 1 and also the difference between the teams. Lee Henley explained that the three complaints for that team had been upheld

and learning for this team was highlighted on page 63. Joe Tynan said that there were no differences between the teams, only that they were separated to ensure a manageable caseload in each team to ensure a good standard of practice. The complaints also helped to identify the learning needed which was followed through with the teams.

RESOLVED:

That scrutiny committee considered and noted the report.

21. SEND Inspection Outcome - Written Statement of Action Update

The report, which can be found on pages 73 – 116, was presented by Michele Lucas.

The Chair said it was positive to see the difference in caseloads which had been mentioned at Committee back in February 2020 where there had 250 – 300 caseloads. Regarding agencies working together, he questioned how effective the information sharing and working together across partnerships had been and if this would continue to be effective. Michele Lucas answered that Thurrock had a strong partnership ethos and had a strong partnership with schools, including academies, on SEND improvement. There were a wide range of partners that included schools and health representatives that worked together on the SEND improvements.

Councillor Akinbohun asked how the service were engaging with parents during the pandemic. Michele Lucas answered that engagement had been via virtual meeting platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. There were also phone calls particularly for parents who did not have access to technology but some schools did make this available. There were a range of mediums in place including an Engagement Officer.

Councillor Muldowney commented that progress had slowed in the SEND action plan because of the dissolution of the CaPa Group and queried the reason for the dissolution. Michele Lucas answered that CaPa's Chair had done an amazing job but her son had reached the upper age range so may have felt that she could no longer stay in CaPa. The group may have felt there was no natural successor as Chair so had made the decision to disband. Other LAs had experienced similar situations with their parent carer forums but there would now be support from the national infrastructure to develop a new parent carer forum.

Councillor Muldowney also had a letter from CaPa which highlighted the reason for disbanding as they had worked hard to encourage participation in Thurrock and there had been a lack of feedback from the Council particularly since the SEND Ofsted inspection. CaPa had not been able to feedback on the Education Health Care Plans (EHCP) at consultation stage and had not been given additional time to work remotely together with the Council. Councillor Muldowney mentioned Thurrock's ethos of partnership working and questioned the service's response to CaPa's letter. She also felt that the

Council's lack of engagement with CaPa had led to the dissolution and that without CaPa, there would be a delay to the SEND priorities and strategy. She had received feedback from a few families with concerns of engagement and queried the length of time it would take to re-establish a parent participation group.

Michele Lucas answered that CaPa could not continue in the same way without the Chair who had been integral to the group so had disbanded. Referring to the EHCP, she said that a range of partners had been consulted including CaPa who unfortunately were unable to feedback but had not asked for more time on the consultation. Adding to this, Councillor Halden said that the service was grateful for groups such as CaPa and that the Council was obligated to consult other partners to ensure a diversity of engagement. Sheila Murphy explained that the service worked hard to engage with families in the SEND service and that the dissolution of CaPa was sad but the service had a number of ways to engage with families. The service had dedicated resources for engagement and the service would be happy to meet with groups of parents who were not satisfied with the service and highlighted the importance of engagement as it helped the service to develop and improve.

Referring to page 98, Councillor Muldowney sought clarification on why actions B and C were not coded red. She also asked if the areas with an October 2020 deadline were achievable. Michele Lucas answered that actions B and C was amber as there had been some stakeholder consultation on the indicators in the dashboard and was awaiting to engage with a group of parents. Actions were being undertaken which the service was aiming to complete within the time frames. There was an overarching strategy on engagement that included a range of action plans within it. Adding to this, Sheila Murphy said that operational and strategic groups reviewed the actions to identify potential issues which would be managed with multi agency groups.

Referring to the Area of Concern 1, Councillor Muldowney asked for an example of what the discernible difference would be for SEND families. Michele Lucas answered that the realignment of the Senior Management Team had given a greater oversight to the service and ensured that the EHCP process time frames were met. The service was above national and regional figures on the completion of the EHCP process and the service ensured that they knew their specialist provision through engagement as highlighted from Ofsted.

Referring to the SEND Data Integration Project on page 95, Councillor Okunade commented that the online EHCP would help to speed up the process of developing EHCP especially in the current pandemic and questioned the process of the online EHCP. Michele Lucas explained that the project was in three stages and that the first stage involved integrating SEND and education data together which was now live so it enabled a single view for teams across education and skills in the Council. The second stage was the development of the portal in which would have a longer time frame due to the complex integration work to be done. The service was finalising the time scale to get the portal live and progress to the third stage.

Councillor Okunade questioned how parents would be trained to use the portal. Michele Lucas answered that groups of parents and young people would be brought in to work with the service on the EHCP portal who were an important part of the system.

Referring to EHCP applications from parents, Sally Khawaja mentioned that the service's refusal letter did not detail how a parent could appeal the decision and felt that parents had a right to appeal. There was no link provided so made the process more complicated. She also questioned if the service would contact those parents who had received the refusal letters and outline the steps to a tribunal. Sheila Murphy answered that this would be investigated including the paperwork from those parents with refusal letters and an outcome would be provided to Committee. Lynda Pritchard commented that the letter should guide parents on what to do as every parent had a right to a tribunal although mediation was the best way forward to ensure a better working partnership.

RESOLVED:

O&S to scrutinise the work that has been undertaken during this period and offer challenge and support.

22. Thurrock School Wellbeing Service

The report on pages 117 – 126 was presented by Malcolm Taylor.

The Chair was pleased that a telephone service had been set up for the School Wellbeing Service (SWS) and questioned whether there had been feedback on it. Malcolm Taylor answered that the telephone service had started off slow but have had schools and parents directed to this to have longer conversations and discussion of other issues. Some of these calls had led to virtual meetings that involved the school's Educational Psychologist. The telephone service had enabled school staff members to also use the wellbeing service for more supervision and support.

Councillor Akinbohun queried what support children had been receiving since they had been at home. She also questioned if there had been an increase in referrals to the SWS this year and if the service had the capacity to meet a high level of demand. Malcolm Taylor explained that schools were the first point of contact for raising and identifying concerns which was referred to the school's psychologist or the school's wellbeing service and for further support, the SWS would be contacted. Children at home were supported and some children found it easier to discuss issues through a digital medium as they felt more in control and did not have the social complications in a face-to-face meeting. The service continued to talk with schools on children at home who needed additional support and ensuring that those children had access to services whilst at home including the online services that were already established and linked into schools.

Malcolm Taylor explained that research had shown an increase in the number of referrals for wellbeing services and counselling services on a national and regional level. There was a national programme on training, support and recovery for schools and the service was engaging with schools where there were issues identified. The service was working on resilience building within school systems so teachers were able to identify children with particular difficulties and prioritising those with longer term difficulties. He went on to say that there had been an increase in referral rates and there was a significant level of demand but the SWS was well-established so had that additional level of support. The service was looking at capacity levels to that support and had also worked with schools to develop additional services for 16 – 18 year olds who were at higher risk of anxieties and difficulties.

Councillor Muldowney welcomed the SWS and was pleased to see a programme on resilience building within schools. Referring to the Brighter Futures Survey on page 121, she questioned if the process had started up again. Malcolm Taylor answered that the survey was being undertaken with schools again and that before lockdown, an initial evaluation through a comparative study had been the plan but would not be suitable now due to the impact of COVID-19 and the timescales. The service was now moving forward with all schools to have interventions in place and the team working on the Brighter Futures Survey aimed to complete it this term but was proving to be difficult because of access to IT suites. Support would continue to be offered but the service was mindful to offer the right level of support based on current needs and there had been significant changes to the structure of the evaluation to ensure the better outcomes and focus on delivery. Councillor Muldowney felt it was good to have flexibility and praised the staff and teachers in school on their good work despite being under a lot of pressure and stress due to their immense workload.

Councillor Rigby queried whether there was data showing the number of parents or children referring themselves to the wellbeing service compared to the schools or professional bodies referring children. Malcolm Taylor explained that it would be difficult to extract that data but in schools, children were referred where concerns were identified. For self-referrals, these were from parents rather than children themselves but children were able to access other services. Where concerns were referred to SWS, a risk assessment on the child's wellbeing was also undertaken.

Referring to page 119, Councillor Okunade noted that 80% of schools had completed a Mental Health Action Plan and although 20% was a small number, there could be children in that number that really needed the SWS. She questioned how the service was going to ensure 100% on that target to ensure no child missed out on accessing the SWS. Malcolm Taylor said the work had been impacted by the pandemic and the service intended to reach 100%. Schools also had their own plans in place and the support of the other services they used. The service would be contacting schools that had not shown a completed plan to the Council which may have been due to staffing issues at the time but there were no concerns on the plans identified in any schools. There were also regular discussions between Sheila Murphy and

Chief Executives of Thurrock's Academies where issues were picked up and to ensure schools were thinking about the children's welfare.

In regards to recommendation 1.1, the Chair asked that a member of the School Wellbeing Service provide an update to the Committee on a quarterly basis.

1.1 Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny to identify how they would like the new team to report back – to provide an update on a quarterly basis.

1.2 Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny to note the work that has taken place.

The Committee agreed to suspend standing orders at 9.17pm to allow all the items on the Agenda to be heard.

23. Council Tax Exemption for Foster Carers

The report on pages 127 – 134 was presented by Joe Tynan.

The Chair welcomed the scheme as foster carers would be saving money and noted that very few Councils had this scheme.

Councillor Muldowney had no objections to supporting foster carers but had concerns about fairness and that it would not be a means-tested benefit as some people had higher levels of income. She sought reassurance that the scheme would not affect the Council's ability to give discounts to families in dire financial need. Joe Tynan explained that some foster carers already received a certain level of benefits and the scheme would add to that but it would be dependent on the foster carer's council tax entitlement. Sheila Murphy highlighted that the proposal focused on foster carers only and would not affect anyone else's entitlement to or ability to claim benefits or any other benefits. It was hoped that the scheme would recruit more Thurrock foster carers for Thurrock's children. The recruitment process was rigorous and could take between four to six months which also ensured people were not just taking advantage of the discounted council tax scheme. The Council's current foster carers were thrilled to be recognised through the scheme and it showed the commitment of the Council to people who opened their homes to Thurrock's children who needed it.

Councillor Rigby felt that the scheme was excellent and would save foster carers in the long term. It would also be good if the scheme attracted more foster carers within the Borough.

Councillor Okunade pointed out that some children were cared for out of the Borough and questioned whether those foster carers out of the Borough would benefit from the scheme and how. Joe Tynan clarified that in-house foster carers would qualify for the council tax exemption regardless of where they lived. When future foster carers were recruited, there would be clear

guidelines and boundaries on who would qualify for the scheme. He explained that foster carers out of the Borough would be paid an allowance that would be capped at £1,600.

Councillor Okunade questioned how the service planned to promote the scheme to attract local foster carers if out of borough foster carers were also entitled to the scheme as an allowance. Joe Tynan explained that the current in-house foster carers that lived outside the Borough would qualify for the scheme as an allowance. If any new out of borough foster carers joined, they would not qualify for the scheme. Councillor Halden added that page 131 highlighted that exceptional circumstances could be made at the discretion of Senior Officers where they felt it was necessary.

Councillor Akinbohun questioned how the scheme would benefit someone who already received a council tax exemption. Joe Tynan answered that a person who already had 100% council tax discount would not benefit from the scheme but others who were on 50% exemption would. Cases would be assessed according to personal circumstances. He went on to say that the Council's foster carer pay rates were competitive and with the council tax exemption, if approved, it would put Thurrock ahead of the competition with this unique selling point.

RESOLVED:

For Members to recommend that the introduction of a Council Tax exemption scheme starting in April 2021 (2021/2022 financial year) as outlined in section 3 in this report is considered by Cabinet.

24. Work Programme

The following items were added to the work programme:

- Update on the action plan from the serious case review.

The meeting finished at 9.36 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