

Minutes of the Meeting of the Extraordinary Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 12 November 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
Sarah Williams, Service Manager, Education Support Service
Alison Picknell, School Effectiveness and Early Years Manager
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.

28. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

29. Declaration of Interests

Lynda Pritchard declared that she worked for Thurrock Council in SEND.

30. Pupil Place Plan Update (2020-2024)

The report on pages 5 – 64 of the Agenda was presented by Sarah Williams.

The Chair noted that appendix 1 highlighted a higher number of red cells Tilbury regarding the Published Admission Numbers (PAN) and questioned if discussions or plans were in place to resolve this. Sarah Williams explained that most of the schools in Tilbury were part of the gateway learning community and the service had been in conversations with schools to consider bulge classes and potential expansion where land was available.

Councillor Muldowney sought clarification on the data within the report as she noted an inconsistency in data in regards to children arriving into Thurrock from outside the country and from other parts of the country. Sarah Williams explained that the Pupil Placement Plan (PPP) was produced in the summer and the service had worked on the plan after this. The most up to date data had been used so was different to what had been published in the PPP.

Sarah Williams would look back at the data at the time the PPP was produced and the current data and clarify this back to Committee Members.

The Committee asked that the report be brought back to Committee as an annual report. Councillor Muldowney questioned whether the two new primary inclusion bases were fully subscribed and the extent of the exclusion issues in Thurrock and if there were enough resources to meet that need. Michele Lucas explained work was being undertaken around predictive indicators and that exclusions were relatively low for this term but could change. She went on to say that schools had been doing well since pupils had returned after lockdown and in following government guidelines for the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools would continue to be monitored and supported. The need for inclusion places were met last year and there were good partnership arrangements in place with schools.

The Vice-Chair questioned if there was a contingency plan for pupils arriving in Thurrock who had no available school places and if they were placed in schools outside of the Borough. Sarah Williams answered that the service aimed to keep children within Thurrock's schools and was continuously monitoring the number of children in Thurrock against the number of school places. Schools were supportive and this academic year, some schools were able to open bulge classes where there had been an extra number of children without school places.

Councillor Okunade asked how schools were managing to fit children into primary schools considering the social distancing measures that were currently in place. Sarah Williams answered that schools had taken risk assessments to ensure children were able to fit into classrooms safely and within their bubbles. If there were no available spaces, the next nearest school place would be offered but children were in the school places that parents had requested.

Sally Khawaja asked whether siblings had been separated due to no available school place in the same schools. Sarah Williams answered that the service tried to place siblings together particularly where it was part of the school's admissions criteria but where it was not possible, parents chose to stay on the school's waiting list or they were offered an alternative nearby school that would be able to take siblings in.

The Committee discussed giving schools recognition of their work and officers confirmed that schools were appreciated and that the service had an important partnership with schools. The service was in regular contact with Headteachers and recognised the school's hard work.

RESOLVED:

Overview and Scrutiny Committee was asked to review the PPP recognising the additional schools places that will be required going forward.

31. School Capital Programme Update 2020/21

The report on pages 65 – 116 of the Agenda was presented by Sarah Williams.

Councillor Okunade commented on the importance of adequate provision and that it was a necessity and the statutory responsibility of the Council so supported the recommendations.

The Committee questioned whether the service had considered the social distancing measures in the provision plans of extra buildings in schools as it was likely that the COVID-19 pandemic would still be ongoing. The Committee also questioned if money would be procured from the EU and whether the service had considered the number of children that could come from new housing developments. It was difficult to predict the number of children coming into the Borough and the Committee sought clarification on whether other factors, besides previous years' data, were used to predict and forecast the potential number of children in future years.

Sarah Williams answered that social distancing measures were being considered in school expansion works and were also looking at how to improve spacing in current schools. She explained that school funds were not procured from the EU and was from the basic needs allocation which was only allowed for the School Capital Programme. Children that could come from housing developments were forecasted and fed back to the Planning Department on potential planning developments which was also fed back to national government. The service worked closed with the Planning Department to consider potential housing developments to forecast the potential number of children but 1 bed homes were not counted although a child could potentially live within a 1 bed home. It was hard to predict the number of families that could move into Thurrock.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That O&S supported the recommendation to Cabinet that a provisional School Capital Programme budget of £8 million as set out in this report be approved.**
- 1.2 That O&S supported the recommendation to Cabinet to approve the commencement of the procurement process in accordance with Council & EU procurement procedures to appoint Architect led multi discipline designers and Project Teams, for the next School Capital Programme and appoint the Principal Contractors to take forward the proposed schemes.**

32. Thurrock Childcare Sufficiency Annual Assessment 2020

The report on pages 117 – 150 of the Agenda was presented by Michele Lucas.

The Chair questioned how the Thurrock Childcare Sufficiency Annual Assessment was promoted to parents. Michele Lucas explained that this was publicised on the Council's website and that the Early Years Team provided supporting information to Children's Centres and parents when they called enquiring about Early Years places. She went on to say that the early years setting was critical in helping children to move onto the next step of school.

Councillor Muldowney commented that she had read that the Early Years provision was under threat because not many places had been taken up during the COVID-19 pandemic. She would have liked to see an analysis on whether Thurrock's childcare provision would be impacted and was aware that the 30 hours childcare funding was already underfunded. She queried whether there would be enough early places to deliver the childcare provision when the economy improved. Officers explained that the Early Years Team was working closely with schools and providers to support their sustainability. The number of places available were not reliant on schools only and was a mixed economy that included private providers, childminders and schools. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Early Years sector had been strengthened and the service had supported the Borough's Early Years Providers with funds to help stabilise the market and had match funded nursery providers where it looked as though they would receive less government funds than they did in the autumn term 2019. The Committee asked for an update report to be brought back.

Councillor Okunade commented that not many schools offered the 30 hours childcare entitlement and questioned how schools could be expected to offer this as it was not a statutory requirement. Councillor Rigby questioned whether the 15 and 30 hours childcare entitlement were issues of payments as it meant providers received less funds. Michele Lucas explained that private providers offered more 30 hours childcare funded places and some schools offered this as well to help children settle into the school's system but there were other factors which would be detailed in the future report. On payment issues, she said that the challenge was the funding allocated which was set by national government. However, most private providers operated on a mixed system where it included private payments and the childcare entitlement hours.

RESOLVED:

That Children's Services O&S noted the Annual Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2020.

33. Inspire 2019/2020 Report

The report on pages 151 – 158 of the Agenda was presented by Michele Lucas.

The Chair questioned whether young people were supported and taught to manage personal finances and if the third property for care leavers as mentioned in paragraph 2.10 had been purchased yet. Michele Lucas

answered that Councillor Hebb had supported programmes around finance management as part of the Inspire offer which were available in the Thurrock Adult Community College and offered to schools. The third property for care leavers had not been purchased yet and would be covered in a Head Start Housing report that would be brought to Committee at a later date.

Councillor Muldowney highlighted concerns of the high unemployment figure in Thurrock and the impact to young people. She sought clarification on the impact to apprenticeships and how secure college funding was. She noted that the Kickstart programme offered jobs to young people but were for 6 month contracts and was concerned that there would be no job opportunities at the end and felt apprenticeships would be better supported.

Michele Lucas explained that it was hoped that the Kickstart programme would have jobs available at the end and that it would enable some apprenticeships to be made available again. She mentioned that an academy trust was creating 30 placements for the Kickstart programme which would also have job roles available once it ended. She went on to say that the Economic Vulnerability Task Group were looking into solutions for youth unemployment and other organisations were creating placements but the key point was to ensure young people were equipped with the right skills for when job opportunities became available. The service was working with training providers to ensure that young people were supported and the Council was looking to support the Borough's vulnerable groups with supported internships that could potentially lead to apprenticeship programmes. She went on to say that the Council's voluntary services had also been looking into opportunities for young people in small voluntary organisations.

Councillor Rigby sought clarification on why the number of 18 – 24 year olds claiming benefits were higher in Thurrock than other parts of the country. Michele Lucas answered that Thurrock had a higher number of retail opportunities where more 18 – 24 year olds were employed there and also there was the factor of young people finishing their degrees and returning home to Thurrock.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 O&S to scrutinise the work that has been undertaken by Inspire in 2019-2020 and offer challenge and support.**
- 1.2 O&S to consider how they could support the various Inspire services, especially when faced with the challenges of the pandemic.**

34. Work Programme

The following items were added to the work programme:

- Pupil Place Plan Annual Report.
- Update on Thurrock Childcare Sufficiency.
- Head Start Housing Annual Review.

The meeting finished at 8.45 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**