

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 15 June 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Elizabeth Rigby (Chair), Sara Muldowney (Vice-Chair), Qaisar Abbas, Srikanth Panjala, Maureen Pearce and Aaron Green (substitute for Vikki Hartstean)

Apologies: Councillors Vikki Hartstean

In attendance: Priscilla Bruce-Annan, Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business Manager
Jenny Coles, Independent Chairperson & Scrutineer Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills
Steven Mair, Interim Chief Financial Officer
Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help
Angela Surrey, Youth Worker, Children's Services Youth Cabinet
Rhiannon Whiteley, 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.

The recording of the meeting can be found from the following link:
[2023/24 recordings | Committee recordings | Thurrock Council](#)

31. Minutes

The minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 14 March 2023 were approved as a true and correct record.

32. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

33. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

34. Terms of Reference

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report and explained that this item is to draw Committee Member's attention to the terms of reference of the Committee which is in the Council's Constitution. It sets out what areas the Committee covers and essential information such as the quorum for meetings.

ACTION 1: Councillor Muldowney requested a further advert be put out for co-opted members for the Committee

35. Youth Cabinet Update

The Youth Cabinet Representatives presented an update to the Committee on the Youth Cabinet and a separate presentation on their Youth Wellbeing Day. The Youth Wellbeing Day involved activities such as debates around social media, a quiz, answering questions on health and wellbeing, building a campfire and a bug hotel and a canoe activity.

The Committee thanked the Youth Cabinet Representatives for their presentations.

Following the presentation the following was confirmed:

- Recruitment to the Youth Cabinet is going well
- It is hoped that those who attended the Youth Wellbeing day will feed back the knowledge gained on health and wellbeing to their wider social groups so others will know what is available
- The Chair and Vice Chair of Youth Cabinet will change from September

36. Fees and Charges Review 2023/24

The Chair agreed to hear item 9 next.

The Interim Chief Financial Officer introduced the report and commented that the Council needs to do what it can to put it back into a sustainable financial position. The Council has begun a three-part review of fees and charges. The first stage is to examine benchmarking and some price reviews. In the second stage there will be further price reviews. The third stage will be a longer-term piece of work which normally takes around 2-3 years and this will look at the profitability of all services and that the Council is actually charging what it can charge for. The recommended price reviews are contained within the appendix to the report.

During the discussion the following was acknowledged/ confirmed / highlighted:

- The Vice-Chair commented that she did not find it acceptable to raise fees and charges twice in the same financial year and for the raises to be above inflation
- The Vice-Chair noted that in the Equality Impact Assessment the charges will negatively affect children and young people in the borough and they are not responsible in any way for the financial situation the Council finds itself in.
- The Council's financial position is extremely challenging, there is a need to reduce expenditure and increase income. The Commissioners have specifically requested that fees and charges are reviewed. An exercise has been completed where they have looked at whether in the previous 5 years fees and charges have kept pace with inflation. If a charge hasn't been increased in the last 4 years, it will see a much larger increase in its 5th year. Councils cannot make a profit but they can fully recover their costs.
- The Vice-Chair noted the negative impacts in relation to Grangewaters recorded in the equality impact assessment and that the increase in charges is still being proposed
- Market testing has been completed in relation to Grangewaters and a central Government funded Holiday Activity Programme is available for vulnerable children to ensure they have access to similar activities. There are also other programmes for children with Special Educational Needs. Work is also being completed to identify external funding and officers are always looking at ways to generate income on the Grangewaters site.
- The Assistant Director for Education invited the Committee to put forward any suggestions they may have on how to generate income from the site and involve businesses. The Chair suggested the site could be used for advertising space.

Councillor Muldowney, Councillor Green and Councillor Panjala did not agree to recommendation 1.1 and the commitment to full cost recovery and annual CPI inflation increases as the default. Councillor Muldowney also commented that although it is not a recommendation that the Committee is being asked to agree the changes to the fees and charges being proposed, she wanted it noted that she does not agree to them. Councillor Green and Councillor Panjala agreed with Councillor Muldowney's comments. The Chair, Councillor Pearce and Councillor Abbas agreed with recommendation 1.1

All Committee members agreed with recommendations 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4.

ACTION 2: *Councillor Muldowney requested a more detailed breakdown of the working out to explain the percentage increases in fees and charges proposed.*

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the proposed Fees and Charges policy, Appendix 1, in particular**

agreeing the commitment to full cost recovery and annual CPI inflation increases as the default.

- 1.2 That Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the proposed Fees and Charges increases for the material areas, Appendix 2.**
- 1.3 That Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the proposed new Charges in section 8 of this report.**
- 1.4 That Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the requirement for a further detailed review & analysis of remaining Fees and Charges by Quarter 4 2023/24.**

37. Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Partnership

The Business Manager for Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Partnership presented the update report to the Committee on the work of TLSCP and progress made on case review action plans.

- Councillor Green referred to the Thematic Review into Serious Youth Violence and gang related crime and queried what the further action points are to put residents at ease concerned about visiting areas such as Chafford Hundred Train station and Lakeside. It was confirmed that some project work is being completed in schools to work with children who may be at risk and are displaying questionable behaviours in schools. The aim is to pick up children at risk at an earlier age.
- The attendance at the Walk Online Roadshow was very good with only a few children not attending due to illness or not being at school on that day.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Committee note the update on the work of the LSCP and the progress made on Action Plans to date.**

38. Children's Social Care Performance - Quarter 4 2022-23

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help presented the report to the Committee and summarised as follows: -

- The number of referrals between January and March 2023 have stayed roughly the same
- The number of children on Child Protection Plans has remained stable

- The number of Looked After Children has remained fairly steady at 292 at the end of March, a greater proportion of LAC children are Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children than the year before
- The number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children has gone up. This trend has been seen across all Local Authorities.
- Adoption numbers have increased to 14. Performance in this area has improved. Pre-covid around 12 children were adopted annually, during covid it dropped to 7-8. Some of this was due to delays in court as a result of the pandemic.

Following the presentation members were invited to ask questions. Key points raised included:

- Return home interviews are not always possible as young people don't want to engage. A lot of work is being completed to encourage young people to engage with the interviews even if it is not a social worker conducting it but some other professional who has a relationship with the young person. The Vice Chair congratulated the department on the increase in number of return home interviews completed.
- Some of the statistics can be affected if there is a family with a large number of children in it. Performance is measured monthly and audits take place to make sure the threshold is right.
- Foster care recruitment nationally remains an issue. Thurrock has a good fostering recruitment campaign, 7 households were recruited in year and recruiting more foster carers remains a challenge. Work continues with the Communications team to improve this.
- Placement sufficiency is a big concern for Local Authorities. Two residential placements have been set up in Thurrock and more options are being looked at.
- The Committee discussed the figures around care leavers not in education, employment or training. The department has regular meetings to monitor this and the Strategic Lead works closely with Inspire. Many young people are not ready for an apprenticeship and work needs to be done to get them ready for an apprenticeship such as supported internships. This area is a national and local challenge. The Assistant Director for Education stated they are trying to increase the scope of employers who are able to offer apprenticeships.
- The department has recently recruited 9-10 newly qualified social workers who will be starting once they have completed their studies. There are also another 6 about to start. Recruitment of social workers remains a national issue and to combat this Thurrock is trying to find a different way to recruit through growing their own social workers.

ACTION 3: *Councillor Panjala requested a breakdown of the number of permanent social workers and agency social workers. The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help agreed to provide this after the meeting. Councillor Muldowney requested confirmation of the total number of social workers employed by the Council.*

ACTION 4: *Councillor Panjala requested a breakdown of the difference in pay for agency social workers and permanent social workers.*

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That members review the areas of improvement and areas requiring further development as well as challenges in Children's Social Care.**
- 1.2 That members note the work undertaken to date to manage demand for statutory social care services.**

39. Statutory Duties Report - Education

The Assistant Director for Education introduced the report. The Assistant Director for Education confirmed that the Committee is not being asked to consider recommendation 1.2 "*Children's Overview & Scrutiny to review these duties in line with the new operating models developed by Children's Services*" as the operating model has not been circulated.

The Committee discussed the report and the following was highlighted / confirmed: -

- The Home to School Transport budget overspends. The Department are looking at ways to reduce this. This may include providing a train or bus pass to a young person where it is safe to do so, or to offer parents or a relative mileage or a personal budget.
- Some children have struggled to return to school after the pandemic, the Local Authority has termly meetings with all schools to look at attendance and conducts case work to see what can be done to assist a child to attend school.
- The Local Authority has a statutory duty to ensure all children have a school place
- Recruitment in the Early Years sector remains a challenge and recruitment in the Educational Psychology Service
- Requests for Education and Health Care Plans continue to rise
- Recruitment of Speech therapists remains a challenge, however this is a health commissioned service.
- A review of the Home to School Transport policy is being completed. When it is completed, it will go through the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- All 36 children who were due to attend the Harriet Primary School in Avey have been offered a school place elsewhere

ACTION 5: *The Assistant Director for Education will review that the appeals process is outlined in the refusal letter for Home to School Transport.*

ACTION 6: *The Assistant Director for Education to confirm to Councillor Muldowney how many children have lost Home to School Transport.*

RESOLVED :

1.1 Children's Overview & Scrutiny to gain an in-depth understanding of the Council's Statutory duties across Education and Skills in Children Services.

40. Statutory Duties - Children's Social Care

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help introduced the report. She confirmed that the department is subject to regular inspections to ensure that the Statutory duties are met. Ofsted conduct inspections and ILAC (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services) inspections were also introduced in 2018. An ILAC inspection of the Service was completed in November 2019. The Youth Offending Service was also inspected by HMIP last year and received an outcome of Good.

During the discussion the following was confirmed or highlighted:

- The Local Authority has a Statutory duty to have an out of hours service. The department no longer has a dedicated out of hours emergency duty team. The department did look at the impact of not having a dedicated team. There is someone on duty every night and this work is covered now by staff who also work during the day time on a Rota. An experienced social worker and manager is on call every night. The feedback so far has been very positive.
- The Corporate Director for Children's Services confirmed that the budget for Children's Services is less for 2023-24 than 2022-23 as a result of savings created of around 1 million pounds.

RESOLVED:

1.1 Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee to be aware of the council's statutory duties in relation to Children and Young People

1.2 Committee to be assured that the statutory duties as set out are being met.

41. Work Programme

The Committee discussed the work programme. A report on the Aveley schools and Orsett Heath and the Adult Community College will be brought to the November meeting.

An update report on the Governments report Stable Homes Built On Love will be provide at the November meeting.

Councillor Carter offered to attend the March meeting as Portfolio Holder for Education to provide an update for the Committee.

The meeting finished at 9.16 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**