

## Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 25 January 2024 at 7.00 pm

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**Present:** Councillors Paul Arnold (Chair), Vikki Hartstean (Vice-Chair), Adam Carter, Georgette Polley and Cici Manwa

**Apologies:** Councillors John Cecil and Augustine Ononaji

**In attendance:** Carly Banks, Participation and Engagement Officer  
James Bennett, Service Manager  
Luke Froment, Service Manager, Children Looked After  
Sharon Hall, Assistant Director, SET CAMHS and Children's Services for South Essex & Thurrock  
Daniel Jones, Service Manager for Looked After Children  
Kate Kozlova-Boran, Service Manager, Preparing for Adulthood  
Clare Moore, Strategic Lead - YOS and Prevention  
Ines Paris, Designated Lead Safeguarding Nurse  
Keeley Pullen, Head Teacher for Virtual School  
Tina Russell, Area Manager, NELFT  
Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help  
Ewelina Sorbjan, Assistant Director Housing and Development  
Trevor Willis, Service Manager Quality Assurance  
Luke Tucker, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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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.

### **21. Minutes**

Co-Opted members Jackie Enifer and Wendy Caswell as well as Officer Ewelina Sorbjan, noted that their attendance was not recorded in the minutes of the meeting 5<sup>th</sup> September 2024.

### **22. Items of Urgent Business**

There were no urgent items of business.

### **23. Declaration of Interests**

No interests were declared.

Before moving on the Chair asked of all those in attendance to introduce themselves.

The Chair sent his congratulations to the winners at the annual foster care awards that took place the 19<sup>th</sup> January 2024.

The Chair thanked Daniel Jones for his service and wished him well in his new position.

Councillor Carter informed the Committee of the Christmas dinner organised for care leavers. He noted it was great that these opportunities now happen in Thurrock.

## 24. CiCC (Children in Care Council) Presentation

*At 19:13pm Councillor Polley arrived at the meeting.*

The Children in Care Council (CiCC) presented their report to the Corporate Parenting Committee:

- The CiCC has been rebranded and merged with Young Voices, therefore the CiCC are now known as Thurrock's Young Voices
- There were 10 members of CiCC but with the change to Young Voices the group has expanded.
- There is a young panel that interviews social workers and other professional in children services, there are also train them too.
- Young Voices want to help to make the Corporate Parenting Committee young person friendly, to have two big events per year and to create a young inspectors programme.

Members noted asked the following questions:

- The Chair noted the suggestions of Young Voices and would be happy to meet Young Voices separately to talk more about this.
- **ACTION:** Young Voices item to be first item on the agenda for the Corporate Parenting Committee.
- Councillor Carter noted the suggestion of Young Voices for reports written should be more intelligible, they are public documents and should be accessible for all.
- Councillor Hartstean asked for an explanation of the power of participation training.
  - Training for social workers and support workers, delivered by young people. The training taken so far is successful.
  - Looking to hold specific sessions for personal advisors and foster carers.
- Councillor Manwa thanked Young Voices for attending and was grateful for their input into the meeting. Councillor Manwa also agreed

with Councillor Carter on the accessibility of public documents and looked forward to seeing what Young Voices does in the future.

## **25. Initial Health Assessments for Looked After Children (Update)**

The Chair moved the meeting onto item 10 on the agenda, Initial Health Assessments for Looked After Children (Update).

The Head of Looked After Children and the Assistant Director of SET CAMHS & Children's Services for South Essex & Thurrock presented the report and highlighted the following points:

- Performance is not improving, but the Local Authority remains committed to improving and meeting timescales.
- Timely performance is no longer achievable with current resources and has been escalated to the highest levels with the ICB & Childrens Services.
- A Task and Finish Group led by the ICB starts on the 30<sup>th</sup> January 2024.
- This is an Essex County wide issue not just an issue in the Thurrock area.
- The current system cannot cope with the current numbers and solutions are not cost neutral.

Members raised the following points and asked the following questions:

- The Chair shared his frustration with the performance regarding Initial Health Assessments and noted that action was needed now as the current situation is not acceptable.
- Councillor Carter thanked officers for keeping the Committee up to date. Councillor Carter noted it was a national issue and asked if targets were realistic and achievable.
  - The Local Authority should be ambitious, a lower rate should not be expected.
  - Data that is shared is transparent.
- Councillor Carter agreed and noted that everyone was committed and working hard.
- The Chair also noted it was a national issue, but the Local Authority needs to get it right for the children in its care.
  - There is a national shortage of paediatricians and assessments need to be completed by paediatricians.
  - Solutions are being looked for and pressure is being put on NHS England for a more permanent solution.
  - Additional doctors have been identified to support existing workforce.
- Councillor Polley suggested that a findings report be sent to Overview and Scrutiny. Councillor Polley asked if there is a breakdown of areas where demand is higher.

- Highest referrals come from the Thurrock area within Mid-South Essex area. Mid-South Essex has a high rate of unaccompanied children.
- Councillor Polley noted that it needs to be seen that we are doing the best job that we can.
  - Task and Finish Group should bring real change to the service.
- Councillor Shinnick asked if 3 months was long enough for the Task and Finish Group to look at the issues in detail.
  - Issues are known, 3 months sound ambitious but confident it is enough to find solutions.
- Councillor Polley sort assurance that no child's health had been impacted due to the delays.
  - No. If any health needs are identified (physical or mental) by the Local Authority appointments are made with GP's, specialists or CAMHS.

The Chair read the recommendation to the Corporate Parenting Committee.

**RESOLVED:**

**1.1 Members note the impact of reduced additional Paediatric capacity on securing timely IHA's.**

**1.2 Members are advised of the delay reasons and that performance is declining since Q1 23/24**

**1.3 That the matter is returned to the Health and Well Being Board for review prior to the March Corporate Parenting Committee.**

**26. Children's Social Care Performance 2023-24**

The Head of Looked After Children presented the report and highlighted the following points:

- Number of looked after children in the Local Authority's care is stable.
- Number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children has increased.
- Slight increase of number of looked after children with a disability.

Members raised the following points and asked the following questions:

- Councillor Hartstean sort an explanation of the term family disfunction.
  - A broad category explanation for the breakdown of relationships within a family.
- Councillor Carter noted the increase of absent parenting from 10% to 15% and noted the average nationally was 5%. Councillor Carter asked why the Local Authority had a higher percentage than others.
  - Thurrock is a port authority as a result has a slightly higher number of UASC (Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children).

- The Chair sort an explanation of the local pan-Essex protocol and asked how the Local Authority diverts a child from the justice system.
  - Out of court disposal panel works within the pan-Essex protocol, the Essex Police area.
  - Referral is received from the police that is considered to be low level crime; an assessment of the child is undertaken by a youth justice practitioner. A plan of intervention is created for the child.
- Councillor Manwa noted abuse and neglect are the main categories why children are taken into care and that statistic was higher than Thurrock's statistical neighbour. Councillor Manwa asked for details regarding counselling and mental health support that the Local Authority provides to those children.
  - Range of services: consultation service with CAMHS, community-based services like virtual school, foster carers have access to training.
  - CAMHS provides a fast-track service for looked after children.
- Councillor Carter asked for an explanation for figures relating to statistical neighbour.
  - Numbers can vary due to authority size.
- Councillor Hartstean asked why there was a drop from 100% in December 2022 to 73% in September 2023 in return home interviews and if there were any concerns regarding this.
  - Contract with Inspire ended in April, new workers started in October, the service is now up to 100%

The Chair read the recommendation to the Corporate Parenting Committee:

**RESOLVED:**

**1.1 That members note improvements in Children's Social Care and note the work that is undertaken to ensure good and improving performance.**

**1.2 Members scrutinise the performance data and provide challenge to the service as required on how, as corporate parents we provide appropriate services, keep children and young people safe and promote good outcomes.**

**27. Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2022-23**

The Service Manager for Safeguarding and Reviewing presented the report and highlighted the following points:

- IRO service carried out 800 reviews during 2022/23, with 98.7% reviews in timescales.
- There are more males than females in Local Authority Care.
- Number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children has increased in line with government projects.

- Most looked after children have full care orders, but there is an increase of children placed under section 20 of the Children Act 1989.
- New templates have been created to make documents more user friendly for looked after children.

Members raised the following points and asked the following questions:

- Councillor Polley asked why data for gender was only split into male and female.
  - The service will look at how better to present the data.
  - Numbers of those who identify as a different gender are too small to show in data.
- Councillor Polley suggested another column of data should be shown to acknowledge that the Local Authority recognises those who identify as a different gender.
- Councillor Manwa noted that the figures added to 100% and argued even if the numbers were small, they still would be noticeable.
  - Percentages could have rounded up or nobody in the age cohort identified in any other way.
- Councillor Hartstean noted regarding participation reviews that in 2019/20 those who did not attend was 18.8% and in 2023 it had gone up to 30.5%. Councillor Hartstean asked if there were any concerns or if the reasoning was understood for the increases.
  - Looked after children send information for their reviews in a variety of ways.
  - IROs meet young person's where possible before their review.
  - Young persons may wish to do other things than attending the meeting.
  - There are no concern.

The Chair read the recommendation to the Corporate Parenting Committee.

**RESOLVED:**

**1.1 The Corporate Parenting Committee review, provide challenge and comment on the IRO Annual report 2022 - 2023 and the recommendations in the report.**

*At 20:27pm Sharron Hall left the meeting.*

**28. Education and Employment for Care Leavers**

The Head of Service, Employability and Skills, and Service Manager, After Care presented the report and highlighted the following points:

- A job club has been created with Thurrock Adult Community College to create opportunities for young people to enhance their skills.
- The music studio at Inspire Hub has reopened.

- Mind are delivering well-being sessions for young people.
- The Local Authority is working well with partners.
- Updated local offer for care leavers.
- Looking to increase opportunities for care leavers to work in the Local Authority.

Members raised the following points and asked the following questions:

- The Chair asked if young people taking ESOL course could go straight into employment with the qualifications they achieve.
  - Yes
- Councillor Manwa noted there were a lot of courses on offer. Councillor Manwa asked if there were any difficulties for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children when they turn 18 to get employment or seek further education. Also, what is done to support those children.
  - No young person is turned away from Inspire, tutors work on English and Maths skills.
  - Right to education remains unchanged if you have status or not.
- Councillor Carter noted in Ofsted reports how good the ESOL offer was at the College.
- The Chair sort an explanation of apprenticeships and the apprenticeship bursaries.
  - Some care leavers may feel disadvantaged as the apprenticeship wage is lower, Thurrock Council pays apprentices more than the national minimum wage for apprentices.
- Councillor Polley asked if support was there for those who need to drive to work, for example driving lessons.
  - Yes, support is provided after employment.
  - Driving lessons are included in the local offer, it also includes help with CVs, interviews, and travel.
- Councillor Polley asked if there was support for neurodivergent care leavers.
  - There is support. Personal Advisors would consult with universities and health professionals.
- **ACTION:** Councillor Carter asked if young voices experienced any barriers and to feedback at the next meeting.

The Chair read the recommendation to the Corporate Parenting Committee.

#### **RESOLVED:**

**1.1 Members were invited to consider agreeing a target of 70% of Care Experienced Young People to progress into Employment, Education or Training following the end of year 11 Studies.**

**1.2 Members were invited to consider and agree that Thurrock Council takes a proactive role in offering apprenticeship and work experience opportunities as a corporate parent. These opportunities will be brokered via the Inspire hub.**

### **1.3 Members agree to support identifying other potential opportunities for our care experience young people in the wider communities of Thurrock.**

*At 20:27 Carly Banks and Thurrock Young Voices left the meeting.*

## **29. Children Looked After and Care Leaver Sufficiency Strategy Update**

The Head of Service, Children Looked After presented the report and highlighted the following points:

- There is a national shortage of suitable placements.
- Stable homes built on love sets a number of ambitions for all local authorities to help families and keep children safe.
- Small increase in number of fostering households.

Members raised the following points and asked the following questions:

- The Chair sort clarity around the two Deprivation of Liberty (DOLs) residential homes and asked if his understanding was correct that it was one placement per home.
  - Yes, DOLs orders can help to meet children's needs if appropriate.
- The Chair noted the need for new placements and that the Belhus ward had a high number of care leavers.
  - Local Authority tries to place children where they feel at home.

The Chair read the recommendation to the Corporate Parenting Committee.

### **RESOLVED:**

**1.1 That members are advised of the revised Sufficiency Strategy and have had the had the opportunity to review and comment upon this in relation to Thurrock Council's statutory duty.**

## **30. Missing Children Report**

The Head of YOS and Prevention presented the report and highlighted the following points:

- The process is the same for all children reported missing.
- The majority of children reported missing are aged 16 to 17 years old and return to their placement within 24 hours.
- There are clear plans in place for those missing aged 14 to 15 years old to safeguard them.
- A return home interview is offered to every missing child.
- Number of missing episodes has dropped in the past months with 69% returning within 24 hours.



Members raised the following points and asked the following questions:

- Councillor Carter thanked the work the team had done.
  - Teams are looking at where children go missing as well to try and make those places authorised places.
- Councillor Carter sort clarity on how a place becomes authorised.
  - Detailed checks are undertaken.
- Councillor Polley noted the good work foster cares do and thanked them for the work they do to reduce missing episodes. Councillor Polley asked where missing children are before the return home interview takes place.
  - Initial discussions ask the young person where they have been. Most go back to placement. If the young person is unhappy at their placement teams will investigate issues and try to provide stability.

The Chair read the recommendation to the Corporate Parenting Committee.

**RESOLVED:**

**1.1 That members note the work undertaken to safeguard Looked After Children when they are reported as missing from care and the continued work underway to try to understand the context around individual missing episodes, reduce these wherever possible and improve the quality of the support and intervention provided.**

**1.2 Members scrutinise the data and provide challenge to the service as required on how as corporate parents we provide appropriate services, keep children and young people safe and promote good outcomes.**

**31. Work Programme**

Members discussed the work programme and made the following comments:

- The Chair asked if there would be an update on IHAs.
  - Possible verbal update as timescales would be too tight to produce a report for the next meeting.
- Councillor Polley asked when the task and finish group would finish regarding IHAs.
  - A verbal update can be given at the next meeting.
- Councillor Carter asked if IHAs could be an agenda for the first Corporate Parenting Committee in the next municipal year.

The recording of the meeting can be found from the following link:

[Corporate Parenting Committee - 25 January 2023, 7:00pm - Thurrock Council committee meeting webcasts \(public-1.tv\)](#)

**The meeting finished at 9.11 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](mailto:Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk)**