

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 31 July 2024 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Elizabeth Rigby (Vice-Chair), Ngozi Alike, John Cecil (as substitute for Councillor Heath) Cathy Sisterson, Neil Speight, and Lee Watson (as substitute for Councillor Hurrell)

Laura Hall, Thurrock OpenDoor, Children In Care Council
Wendy Caswell, Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association
Jackie Enifer, Vice-Chair, Thurrock One Team Foster Care Association Representative

Apologies: Councillors Mark Hurrell, Lynda Heath

In attendance: Councillor Vikki Hartstean – Portfolio Holder for Children’s Services & Education
Janet Simon, Assistant Director – CSC and Early Help
Elise McQueen, Head of Looked After Children
Trevor Willis, Service Manager Quality Assurance
Tina Russell, Area Manager, NELFT
Luke Froment, Service Manager, Children Looked After
Sabrina Codrington, Careers Manager
Peter Doherty, Strategic Lead - Housing Operations
Trudy Marfo-Amponsah, Service Manager - Adults Quality Assurance
Carly Banks, Participation and Engagement Officer
Joanne Kemp, Support and Participation Worker
Ines Paris, Designated Lead Safeguarding Nurse (remotely)
Emma Trencher, 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.

1. Minutes

The Minutes of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on the 19 March 2024 were approved as a correct record.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no urgent items of business.

3. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Thurrock Young Voices

Thurrock Young Voices presented their Report.

Following the last meeting progress had been made on the 2024 goals, in particular Power of Participation. They had held their first big event which was a huge success with lots of attendees and had great feedback. They have since held a second event, which was equally met with great feedback. They now give out a members' pack to new joiners of Young Voices including pen/notebook, t-shirt and hoodie and wellbeing book.

They thanked the Council for passing the motion regarding protected characteristic. They advised this had empowered them knowing the Council were supporting them and allowing them opportunities without discrimination for being in care.

All Councillors present thanked the representatives of Thurrock Young Voices and agreed they were an inspiration. Members raised the following questions:

How do you get the funds for the new joiners' pack, was this through fundraising or from the Council?

- The Council funded this.

What was the make up of the 28 officers who attended the workshop and did you feel listened to and did it make a difference?

- PAs, social workers, Foster Team, Managers and Health Visitors. Everyone was engaged, giving input, asking questions. It had made a slight impact, but hoping the impact would become greater. Through the feedback instead of 1 training event, they would now be running 3 events throughout the year.

Tell us a little bit about Young Inspectors?

- This was being looked at, it was a new initiative, and they were looking to recruit people and would report back.

What could Councillors do to support you?

- More workers and Councillors to come and meet the members. They needed Councillors to support the initiative which would raise awareness.

What could Councillors do to increase the numbers of LAC/Care Leavers joining Thurrock Young Voices? How were hard to reach children encouraged to join?

- Actively and positively promote the group. Empower all children and provide encouragement.

How many young people are in the group?

- Around 30

Action Points

- The committee agreed that they would engage and visit Thurrock Young Voices and would encourage all Councillors across all parties to get involved with the promotion and engagement of this group.
- Thurrock Young Voices were invited to engage in the Childhood Obesity Task & Finish Group, that had come from People's Overview and Scrutiny committee. This could be to join and/or give their feedback to this committee or if more comfortable, to attend future workshops that would be arranged. It was agreed following Councillor Rigby's meeting with the Director of Public Health, more information would be shared with the group.
- Thurrock Young Voices to send dates to Councillors of events they had planned and to provide details of when it was convenient for Councillors to meet and talk to the group.

5. Children's Social Care Performance

The Head of Looked After Children presented the Report and highlighted at the end of quarter four of 2023/24 the following points:

- 290 Children in care.
- Further 269 care experienced young adults aged 18+ were receiving care from Aftercare.
- Children and young adults were visited regularly.
- The management of missing children was consistent and reflected good partnerships with the Police and Thurrock Community Safety.
- Improvement was required in the timelines of Initial Health Assessment which was an area of focus with health partners.
- Areas which they were seeking to show improved outcomes included supporting increased numbers of young people in education, employment or training and ensuring young people had the right accommodation to meet their needs.
- Children were mostly placed with foster carers, or where safe and possible, family members.
- Foster care continued to develop local placements for children.
- There was a decline in children who had become looked after in the last 2-3 years.
- Thurrock had a lower rate of Looked After Children than their statistical neighbours.

Members raised the following questions:

The data shows there had been success with reuniting children with families. What was the average time children spent looked after before being placed back with family?

- A timeframe cannot be placed on this as it varies from child to child.

What are we doing differently to our neighbours to ensure success?

- There was a focus on permanency. Working with extended family networks to support keeping the family together, where it was safe and continually revisiting and reviewing. Thurrock's policy was where safe and appropriate for children to stay within the family network.

The Statistics show 28% (equating to 1 in 4) of looked after children were living outside the borough. This figure being substantially more than the target figure and worse than some of our statistical neighbours. Could reassurance be given that our foster service were not suffering adversely from the financial pressures the Council was under? Children Services were ring fenced and children were a priority. Scrutinising the statistics, it was noted there was a higher percentage than our neighbours placed outside the borough and our recruitment foster carer figures were well below target. What was being done to address this?

- Children Services were well supported financially and had not been asked to make significant cuts to the service. Actively recruiting and were always taking part in recruitment initiatives. Members were asked to note, foster carers were extremely hard to recruit and this was a national issues. The Foster recruitment team were out in the community every day. It was believed Thurrock were competitive and offered a huge amount of support to foster carers which aids retention.

Action point

Members were invited to share their ideas of how to increase recruitment, what could be done better or any initiatives that they were aware of.

Action Point

A report to be brought to a future committee around foster care, showing targets, recruitment figures, retention figures and finances for scrutiny, challenge and to support Corporate Parenting.

What was the distance from Thurrock that children were placed when recorded as outside the Borough?

- Anything over 20 miles outside the Borough. It was noted, these figures also included unaccompanied asylum seekers which would always show as more than 20 miles from their home.

Action Point

Data brought to committee on children placed outside the Borough to be split into two, one showing figures for Children born in Thurrock and one part showing those born outside of Thurrock, including unaccompanied asylum seekers.

How quickly were health assessments carried out? How could support be given to help clear the backlog with health assessments? How were CAMHS managing to support wellbeing?

- A paediatrician had been recruited. This should clear some of the backlog. CAMHS supported the Council and helped with assessment when a priority was identified. They had very good outcomes.

Health assessments were a statutory requirement and delays had an ongoing detrimental effect on the children and the service. We were falling below our targets. What were NELFT doing to rectify this as they were not fulfilling their contract?

- NELFT were looking at additional funding to recruit an additional paediatrician but was also looking at different ways to deliver the service, so onus not placed entirely on paediatric services. It was a priority to have a sustainable solution. No child would wait for medical treatment if they had any medical needs. Children were registered with a G.P. when they come into care and steps were taken to ensure any health needs are met.

Action Point

A meeting to be set up with Councillor Watson and Safeguarding nurse with a view to discussing this in depth. Email addresses to be exchanged.

Action Point

Head of ICB to bring data and a Report to Corporate Parenting Committee regarding Health Care Assessments. To include tangible figures against targets for scrutiny and challenge.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 Members noted improvements in Children's Social Care and noted the work that was undertaken to ensure good and improving performance.**
- 1.2 Members scrutinised the performance data and provided challenge to the service as required on how, as corporate parents they provide appropriate services, keep children and young people safe**

and promote good outcomes. Councillor Speight Abstained following debate regarding the wording of the recommendation.

6. Education, Employment and Training for Care Leavers

The Careers Officer and Service Manager for Care Leavers and Aftercare presented their report setting out the legal duties of the Council and the steps being taken to support Care Experienced Young People to access education and employment. The report set out how Thurrock Council was executing its duties in relation to supporting young people over the age of 16 and entitled to a leaving care service to engage in education, employment and training (EET).

Members asked the following questions:

Why are our percentages of EET lower than our statistical neighbours? Was it improving? Did you start from a lower baseline?

- Mental Health was currently a huge area causing barriers and they were working with MIND to address this.
- Post covid, some services were no longer available and local businesses and local partners were not as engaged as they were pre covid.

Would the provision increase to deal with this?

- No. There had been a 25% cut.

Could we have clearer figures in order to scrutinise against the 70% EET target. Could clarification be provided of today's actual percentage?

- 56%

Due to the cuts made to organisations like Duke of Edinburgh/Princes Trust, had there been an impact on wellbeing and opportunities for our young people?

- Yes. Services that were available were no longer available to young people. Barnardo's had also left Thurrock which had an impact. CSCS card funding cuts had also had an adverse effect.

How do we include SEND young adults in this process?

- All SEND were supported and included.

Could SEND figures and data be supplied separately.

- Yes

Were we engaging with vocational careers and the construction industry?

- Links were being made to look at all industries and how a CSCS card could be obtained.

Are links with schools made to provide data of school leavers who would be entering your service? How do you know who needed to access your service?

- Yes, all children were tracked at year 11 and 12.
- Used the Virtual School resource.

Could our Care Leavers who have success stories be encouraged to be ambassadors and go into schools.

- This was something that was being worked on.
- It was noted 10% of our Care Leavers were in university.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 Members were made aware of the target of 70% of Care Experienced Young People to progress into Employment, Education or Training (EET) following the end of year 11 Studies.**
- 1.2 Members considered and offered challenge to the service about how it is proactive in supporting young people to access EET opportunities including apprenticeship and work experience opportunities as a corporate parent. These opportunities will be brokered via the Inspire hub.**
- 1.3 Members identified and pursued areas where the offer of apprenticeship and work experience opportunities could be improved within the Council and wider community.**
- 1.4 Members requested a report to be submitted to Cabinet to reassess the funding of the Princes Trust, Duke of Edinburgh and other charitable trusts and former partners. To be actioned.**

At 9.03pm standing orders were suspended and it was agreed to allow the meeting to continue until 10.00pm

7. Joint Housing Protocol for Care Leavers

The Head of Housing Operations presented the Report setting how the Local Authority meets its statutory duties and responsibilities to young people leaving care to support them into independent living as adults.

The Joint Housing Protocol was updated annually and was most recently updated in March 2024.

Acknowledgement was made to the lack of housing stock, how this was managed and the steps being made to ensure Care Leavers' needs were met.

A focus had been made to ensure readiness for tenancies and how to prepare Care Leavers and to provide a consistent approach.

Members asked the following questions:

How could the Council do things differently and how could Members support that. There could be an opportunity with the change of planning rules, and how Section 106 money was to be spent. Direction should be given to planning around what Thurrock wanted and how this could help alleviate some of the barriers highlighted in the report.

It was acknowledged that there was very good cross department work being carried out.

RESOLVED:

1.1 The Committee noted the statutory duties of the Local Authority to support young people in obtaining suitable accommodation and how they plan to meet these duties.

1.2 The Committee had oversight of the joint protocols and were invited to be involved in the ongoing review of delivery across Children's Services and Housing Services.

8. Care Experience as a locally protected characteristic

The Service Manager for Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Children Services presented the Report. It was noted a motion had been received and accepted at Full Council on 24 July 2024 to consider granting young people who had experience of being cared for by the Local Authority to be granted protected characteristics locally with the Council, in line with provisions made for other groups under the Equality Act 2010.

The Report outlined the challenges, barriers and discrimination encountered by care experienced young people into adulthood which would be mitigated by their care experience being recognised as a protected characteristic. The local authority's ambitions were highlighted to provide the best possible outcomes for care experienced young people.

Members noted and asked the following:

The committee were keen to see how this progressed going forward and asked that the progress along with successes and failures be communicated.

Action Point

A report to be brought back to committee at a later date.

The Portfolio Holder for Good Growth offered her help and support with the project.

RESOLVED:

1.1 Members applauded, welcomed and supported the Council motion on 24 of July 2024 and understood the benefits of granting protected status to care experienced young people.

9. Transitions to Adult Services for Care Leavers and Children in Care

The Service Manager for Adult Social Care presented the Report. The Report sets out the role and performance of the council in relation to supporting young people in care or leaving care to be assessed and be provided with Adult Social Care Services. The report focused on planning for transitions to Adult Services, including early and initial screening assessments. The Preparing for Adulthood team were a dedicated team in Adult Social Care with skilled social workers and support planners which are particularly critical for young people with SEND which includes looked after children. They support the smooth transition from children to adult services where appropriate.

Members asked the following questions of the Service Manager:

When were the vacancies mentioned in the Report going to be filled?

- Ongoing work was being carried out. One post had been recruited to and awaiting a start date and one post was proving difficult to find a suitable candidate.

How many caseloads are currently being held?

- Not entirely sure of exact figure, around 200 cases, however this was increasing and with more complex cases.

Are your team capable of handling the current caseload and the increase that was coming through?

- It was difficult and the team worked hard and were passionate. They go above and beyond to meet the caseload. It was identified that the team were under-staffed and it was recognised that additional resources were required.

Had there been a significant impact on the lack of post 16 education for young people with specialist need in the Borough? Was it problematic finding places for young people with specialist need post 16?

- The team tried to be as creative as possible ensuring that everyone had access to post 16 education. Ongoing work with Treetops and other specialist centres outside the Borough.

Were transport cuts a problem?

- Yes

Looking at the structure and the ratio of staff to young people, how do you meet the needs of the young people, including assessments, arranging panels, support planning etc. Could work be split with other teams to ensure the backlog is cleared?

- The team work hard and had good retention. Agency staff were used as an interim until permanent positions were filled.

RESOLVED:

1.1 Members of the committee reviewed the work of the Children Looked After Service and Preparing for Adulthood Team in meeting the Council's role as a Corporate Parent. In relation to the work undertaken for Children in Care and Care leavers to transition to adult services where it is appropriate to do so.

10. Local Offer for Care Leavers

The Service Manager presented the Report. The Report set out how the Local Authority met its statutory duties and responsibilities to young people leaving care to provide a published Local Offer so Care Leavers were clear about what support would be offered to them by their corporate parent as they moved into adulthood. The Local Offer had been updated and relaunched, taking into consideration what Care Leavers wanted and had identified their priorities, including celebration of birthdays, help with driving lessons and obtaining driving licences.

Action Point

Send a copy of the Local Offer to those committee members who had not already seen this.

Members acknowledged that the Corporate Parenting training the previous week had discussed the Local Offer this had been useful and insightful and that it was a positive and good piece of work.

RESOLVED:

1.1 The Committee noted the statutory duties of the Local Authority to consult on and publish a local offer for its care leavers

1.2 The Committee had oversight of the Local Offer and were invited to be involved in the ongoing review of delivery across Children's Services and Partners.

11. Work Programme

It was noted that Councillor Hurrell and the Assistant Director for Looked after Children were working on the work programme. Points had been noted throughout the meeting of some reports that the committee would like to see and these would be considered and brought back to committee, trying to keep within the topic of the meeting.

Health Assessments

Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers

An update from CAHMS

Action Point

To liaise with committee members to ascertain if there were any reports they would like to be added to the work programme.

A full recording of this meeting can be found from the following link: Corporate Parenting Committee – Wednesday 31 July 2024, 7:00pm - https://thurrock.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/892836

The meeting finished at 9.56 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