

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 1 June 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Abbie Akinbohun (Chair), Jennifer Smith (Vice-Chair), Adam Carter, Sara Muldowney, Georgette Polley, Jane Potheary, Kairen Raper and Maureen Pearce (Substitute) (substitute for Susan Little)

Chair of the Children in Care Council
Annie Guidotti, Open Door
Sharon Smith, Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association
Jenny Josling, Vice-Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association

Apologies: Councillor Susan Little

In attendance: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Janet Simon, Interim Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help
Naintara Khosla, Strategic Lead, Looked After Children
Clare Moore, Strategic Lead, Youth Offending Service and Prevention
Mandy Moore, Business Intelligence and Data Analytics Manager
Wendy Le, Senior 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 website.

1. Minutes

The minutes of the Corporate Parenting meeting on 2 March 2021 were approved as a correct record.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Children's Social Care Performance

The report was presented by Mandy Moore.

Referring to paragraph 3.4, Councillor Muldowney sought more details on the number of children leaving and entering care and the impact of Covid-19 on this. Janet Simon explained that in 2019-2020, there had been a large number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) who were accommodated and this number had decreased this year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. She mentioned that a few large sibling groups had come into care in February 2020 which had impacted the figures and the number of children in care tended to remain static as some stayed in care longer due to the Covid-19 pandemic or because it was the right place for children at that time. The service held a weekly Placement Panel to discuss children coming into care and worked with families to try to keep children within families if possible. A number of checks and balances were in place alongside care plans and trackers to ensure the right decision was made for children coming into care and continually updated. She went on to say that if a child needed to come into care through a referral, discussions would take place with the parents to assess whether a voluntary arrangement or emergency protection order was needed for the child to come into care. The emergency protection order would enable the service 72 hours for the case to go through the court.

Referring to paragraph 7.1, Councillor Raper questioned whether there were measures in place to address the drop in care leavers in Education, Employment or Training (EET). Naintara Khosla explained that the drop was a direct impact of Covid-19 in the 18 – 21 years old cohort where most of Thurrock's young people had been trying to find work. The service had a programme in place alongside Inspire Youth Hub to support young people in CVs and interviews. A bespoke panel also looked at the interests of a young person to match them with a suitable job depending on the availability of work. The service was working towards a September offer to try to encourage young people to get back into college or work and was currently making full use of the Kickstart programme.

Referring to paragraph 8.1, Councillor Potheary noted that the net gain of a foster household over a two year period was one and sought more details. She felt that it would be useful to see some contextual data behind the figures and compared against neighbouring local authorities. Naintara Khosla answered that a small gain of a foster household and not a decrease was considered successful. It was challenging to recruit foster carers and the service was doing well in the current climate to break even. She said that the service had a good marketing plan to achieve 20 additional foster households. Janet Simon added that the service also took into consideration of the number of children in care and depended on how many a foster household could take. She went on to say that fostering had been successful during the pandemic and the service worked with the foster carers to ensure this. The last three years had seen the service set higher standards for foster carers and some foster carers had withdrawn through this but the standard of care was important for the children in care.

Councillor Polley pointed out Thurrock's neighbouring local authorities and commented that she had heard suggestions before that London boroughs

gave better fostering incentives. She was pleased to see the work that the service had undertaken to ensure Thurrock's foster carers were supported. She asked which local authorities was Thurrock compared against and if there were other reasons (other than Covid-19) why foster households had withdrawn from fostering. Janet Simon answered that statistical neighbours included Medway, Bexley, Bromley, Swindon and Peterborough to name a few but not all performed the same as Thurrock in regards to the number of looked after children. She said that for foster care, the service compared themselves against bordering neighbours such as Essex and Southend in terms of pay and support. This had helped the service to review their procedures and standards to ensure the service had the right foster carers. Thurrock also offered a unique incentive which was the council tax exemption and some local authorities further away also offered this and had seen success. She also said that agency foster carers did not offer more than Thurrock.

The Vice-Chair noted the success in paragraph 5.4 and commended the service for this. She questioned the acronym of SGO in 3.5. Janet Simon explained that this was Special Guardianship Order which meant a permanency placement for a child in foster care.

Referring to page 17 on the increase and decrease of children coming into care, Councillor Muldowney asked if there were underlying factors for this change. Referring to 4.2, she also sought more details on the overrepresentation of children in youth detention from the BAME community. Janet Simon answered that the number of children coming into or leaving care fluctuated and that there was no specific reason for this. She said that last year had seen a big increase because a number of large families had coming into the borough and neglect was a significant issue.

In regards to 4.2, Clare Moore explained that this was a national issues which stemmed back to the police in the amount of stop and searches and arrests with young black males. This had led to an overrepresentation which enabled BAME children to be diverted from the criminal justice system. This diversion work enabled interventions to be provided to BAME children.

The Chair noted that there was a backlog of cases in the courts and questioned how long this would take to be resolved. Janet Simon explained that meetings were being held with the judiciary and that younger children and babies for adoption were being prioritised. The service was looking at remote hearings and spaces in court to prioritise these permanency places.

Councillor Potheary referred to section three of the report and asked that future reports include the performance data of CLA by disability as well.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That Members noted the areas of improvement in Children's Social Care and note the work that is undertaken to ensure good and improving performance.**

1.2 Noted the impact of COVID 19 on performance.

5. Update on the Youth Offending Service, Youth Justice Plan and the role of the Service for Children Looked After

The report was presented by Clare Moore.

Referring to the fifth bullet point in paragraph 3.9, Councillor Polley sought clarification on the type of changes and if this included county lines. Clare Moore answered that there had been an increase in county lines activity and violent crimes in which some related to organised crime.

Councillor Muldowney commented that she was pleased to see the improvements made to the out of court disposal. She commented that the Youth Justice Plan was a vision and felt that it was difficult to grasp what outcomes would be achieved for children. She questioned what resources were reduced as indicated on page 38 and how the service had been creative in delivering their services to young people during lockdown. Clare Moore answered that the reduction in resources related to the grant from the Youth Justice Board for young people on remand. The grant reduced every year and the service's costs increased which the Council absorbed under the placements budget. She went on to say that the service had been creative in seeing young people through online meets and meeting outside in open spaces whilst adhering to guidelines. Councillor Muldowney queried how these costs could be reduced. Sheila Murphy explained that the key was prevention in encouraging young people to not reoffend. She said that recent crimes had been serious knife crimes and the service could not predict how many young people would be on remand. She explained that costs would not be paid if a young person was not convicted and that currently the service had more young people on remand awaiting trial due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Referring to paragraph 3.3, Councillor Potheary questioned how the Council compared against other local authorities. She also asked for more information on the out of court disposal panel. Clare Moore answered that she would look into these details and email these on. She would also share more details of the Youth Justice System plan as shown in appendix one with the Committee.

Councillor Polley sought clarification on young people who moved into and out of Thurrock. She also asked if the children that was currently in Thurrock's care were residents of Thurrock or outside of Thurrock. Clare Moore answered that the children in care in Thurrock were currently Thurrock's residents. She went on to say that there had been families that had moved to Thurrock from London to move away from the young person's life of crime but some would return to that area to commit crimes. She explained that most crimes were committed outside of the borough but were residents of Thurrock.

The Chair questioned whether there were issues of knife crime in Thurrock. Clare Moore explained that the levels of knife crime in Thurrock were not on

the same level as London. However, there was an increase in young people involved in knife crime.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That Members noted the contents of this report and consider the continued improvements made.**
- 1.2 For Members to identify any specific areas that they would like additional information for any subsequent reports**

6. Report for Members on Missing Children, Child Exploitation, Return Home Interviews and Contextual Safeguarding focussed on Children Looked After

The report was presented by Clare Moore.

Referring to paragraph 3.1, Councillor Potheary asked for an update on the missing UASC and how many children were currently missing. Sheila Murphy explained that the UASC were still missing and that some UASC that arrived tended to have plans on where to go and would usually go missing within a few days of arrival. She stated that this was a national issue. She explained that missing UASC was reported to the police and meetings were held every 6 weeks to discuss the cases. If a UASC was found, the service encouraged them to come into care. Sharon Smith added that it was difficult to prevent UASC from leaving a foster home when they already had plans to leave. There were also concerns over their age particularly where they appeared much older than their given age.

Councillor Potheary was concerned that UASC that went missing were vulnerable and open to exploitation. She commented that the 6 weekly meetings seemed far apart. Sheila Murphy explained that if information was received in between meetings, action would be taken immediately. She said that the meetings were not a national requirement and was a part of the Council's practice which Ofsted (at the recent inspection) had assessed as good practice. She explained that as the UASC were not known to the Council, it was hard to track movement as the usual process was to track missing children through family and friend networks. The majority of UASC that arrived were usually placed into the service's care or to other local authorities and very few went missing.

Councillor Carter asked for the figures on the return of missing UASC. Janet Simon answered that 2019 had a larger number of UASC arrivals and that figure had decreased. She said that there were currently two missing UASC aged 16 and 17 and two other missing non-UASC were aged 16. She explained that the service tried to keep children in placements but there were various reasons why UASC would go missing.

Councillor Polley questioned whether there was a reduction of health visitors, teachers or other people that were usually the eyes and ears looking after

children during lockdown restrictions. Janet Simon answered that children referrals came from a number of resources which continued during lockdown. She stated that schools had been fantastic and vigilant during these times and that social workers continued to see looked after children.

Regarding the return home interviews, Councillor Muldowney questioned how the child's voice was fed into these. Clare Moore answered that the child's voice was the main focus and the interview was an opportunity for the child to give their opinion. This was fed back into risk management meetings and development meetings to ensure that social workers were aware of the issue to prevent it from happening again. Janet Simon added that the service aimed to have a balance between ensuring children were safe whilst giving them their freedom.

The Chair asked what measures were in place to prevent UASC from going missing and raised concerns over UASC that appeared older than their given age. Naintara Khosla explained that the service had been working with the police to advise UASC upon arrival of immigration offences. The service encouraged UASC to come into care and that they were safe. Janet Simon said that when a UASC presented themselves as a young person, the Council had to treat them as a young person an age assessment took place. Naintara Khosla explained that the police had a process to collate the biometrics of new arrivals and this would help to identify whether they had made a claim in another country.

RESOLVED:

This report provided the Members of the Corporate Parenting Committee with an overview into the work that has taken place since January 2020 and the improvement journey. There is a commitment from staff to implement these changes, with areas of good practice. Members were asked to note the contents of this report and the provision of support given to young people at risk of exploitation.

7. Corporate Parenting: Fostering Recruitment Strategy

The report was presented by Naintara Khosla.

Councillor Potheary thanked foster carers for their hard work and care. She commented that the branding was good. She asked whether the service had followed up on people's enquiries into foster care to identify and if there was evidence that the council tax exemption had attracted more foster carers. Naintara Khosla answered that the service followed up on people's enquiries to identify why they had not progressed onto being a foster carer. She said that most people were unable to meet the requirements of being a foster carer or that it did not fit in with their lifestyle and some people did not want to enter into a detailed assessment where they would need to disclose their private lives. Following a campaign in March, there had been an increase in April which tapered off in May and the campaign had to be relentless and ongoing. The council tax exemption had helped existing foster carers.

Councillor Potheary questioned whether the service could do more to support potential foster carers such as supporting someone to upsize their home to acquire a spare bedroom for a foster child. Sharon Smith said that some people had the impression that fostering would enable them to acquire a bigger home and that this was not the right idea to have. She explained that not everyone was keen on the whole process of becoming a foster carer or the lifestyle of it as the whole family had to be involved as well.

Councillor Muldowney asked whether the branding would show ethnic diversity on posters and if the rebranding had been done in house. Naintara Khosla said that the rebranding had been done in house and that the poster branding was still being considered.

Councillor Carter questioned whether there was a key demographic group that the service was targeting to become foster carers. Naintara Khosla explained that the marketing was generic to ensure as much interest as possible. Through social media channels, different age groups were targeted in line with the age group users on each platform.

The Committee agreed to suspend standing orders for an extra 30 minutes at 9.24pm.

Councillor Polley sought the opinion of the Children in Care Council (CICC) on the rebranding. She also asked the Foster Carer Association Team if Thurrock was a good place to foster. The CICC representative said that the colour was appealing but that foster care was not all colourful as it was a big change to the child and the foster carers' lives. It was also not an easy process. Annie Guidotti added that Thurrock's CICC would be participating in other CICC's in the eastern region.

In answer to Councillor Polley's question, Sharon Smith said that Thurrock was a good place to be a foster carer as there was support and training in place. She said that she had been involved in the rebranding and that the colours and pictures had been chosen by a group of foster carers who felt these appealed to them. Jenny Josling said that she had joined Thurrock as a foster carer five years ago and that Thurrock had been her first choice. She felt the incentives were good and welcomed the recent council tax exemption.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 Members were updated on the Thurrock's Fostering Recruitment Strategy and the brand.**
- 1.2 Noted the marketing activities to create opportunities to develop increased recruitment of foster carers.**

8. Corporate Parenting Committee Work Programme 2021/2022

The Independent Reviewing Officer report was moved to September's meeting.

The meeting finished at 9.34 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**