

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 12 March 2024 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Elizabeth Rigby (Chair), Sara Muldowney (Vice-Chair), Qaisar Abbas, Vikki Hartstean and Srikanth Panjala

Nicola Cranch, Parent Governor Representative

Apologies:

In attendance: Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help
Sarah Williams, Service Manager, Education Support Service
Andrea Clement, Assistant Director and Consultant in Public Health
Sareena Gill-Dosanjh, Public Health
David May, Head of Finance

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.

39. Minutes

In the 16 January 2024 minutes, the Vice Chair requested an amendment to the 16 November 2023 minutes and Councillor Carter stated his intention to challenge the accuracy of the requested amendment. The matter was raised at Full Council and was referred back to the Committee to consider.

The recording of the November member was reviewed by the Committee Chair and in their view the following is said at minute 7.51.

The Vice-Chair asked the Portfolio Holder for Education "Have you visited the school Councillor Carter?" and the Portfolio Holder for Education responded "no, not Thameside".

Members raised follow up questions with the Portfolio Holder for Education however, it was recognised the minutes contained a factual summary of the meeting in November 2023.

A vote was held, with four Members agreeing to this re-wording and one against.

RESOLVED:

The minutes of the Children's Services O&S Committee meeting of 16 January 2024 were therefore approved as a correct record subject to the amendment the Committee agreed to at the meeting.

40. Items of Urgent Business

An urgent item was raised by the Vice-Chair, in agreement with the Chair. This related to a recent visit to the schools in the borough that have been impacted by the Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) issues. Key points included:

- Following the Vice-Chair's visit to the schools in Thurrock affected by RAAC, several previously raised concerns had been clarified. This included the rationale for the use of marquees for temporary accommodation due to the quicker lead time. Two schools continue to use the marquees and during the visit, a PE class for Reception was underway, although it had been reiterated the marquees were not being used as teaching facilities.
- In relation to St Clere's, positive feedback was received regarding the Losberger accommodation, and it was noted the sports hall had been divided into classrooms with partitions.
- For the East Tilbury Primary School, there was now demountable accommodation located in the playground to provide additional space. The sports hall had also been divided into two using a partition. Staff recognised this is not soundproof, however had adapted their teaching to accommodate, for example larger group work.
- For Arthur Bugler Primary School, the temporary accommodation was being used as staff breakout room, located next to the generator. However, children's activities were located further away therefore there was less of a noise disturbance.
- It was noted all RAAC areas were securely sectioned off.

Action: The Vice-Chair proposed that Janet Clark, Chief Operations Officer for Osborne Co-operative Academy Trust is invited to a future meeting as part of the scrutiny process in relation to this issue.

During discussions, the following points were raised:

- The item of urgent business was challenged by the Portfolio Holder for Education due to the timeframe of the item being raised and that a decision or recommendation was not provided.
- Members recognised the importance of the RAAC concerns as previously raised by the Committee and were reassured by the positive improvements outlined by the Vice-Chair, including safety measures and the use of partitions.
- A further briefing note would be circulated to all Members in due course.

41. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

42. Youth Cabinet Update

Saira, the Youth Cabinet representative presented the report to the Committee. Key updates included Make Your Mark 2024, SEND Youth Voice, 2024 work focus and Member of Youth Parliament (MYP) Elections.

During discussions, the following points were raised:

- Members thanked the Youth Cabinet for their report and their continuous hard work.
- It was noted the Youth Cabinet was particularly passionate about their work with the SEND Youth Voice and was working closely with SEND departments.
- Members recognised the importance of engaging young people with politics and encouraging them to vote, as 67.3% of the adult population that are eligible to vote do so. The work on Make Your Mark was therefore particularly positive and important. The results from this vote were due to officially be announced at the end of March 2024.
- The USP College were thanked by the Youth Cabinet as the student reported a positive experience and engagement as this had previously been a challenge with other schools. The Youth Cabinet would like to engage further with individual schools and Members agreed to provide support to encourage this via Thurrock Council's bulletins and briefings.

Action: Angela Surrey (Youth Cabinet representative) to provide details to the Chair of school engagement and areas requiring Youth Cabinet representation.

The Youth Cabinet representatives left the meeting at 7.35pm

43. Annual Report of Portfolio Holder for Children's Social Care and Early Help

This item was introduced by Councillor Barry Johnson (Portfolio Holder). Key points included:

- The report outlined the work that was undertaken by Children's Social Care within the last year, service priorities and the successes and challenges experienced.
- The most significant challenges highlighted included fostering recruitment and retention, placement sufficiency; recruitment and retention of qualified social work staff, initial health assessments for children who are looked after; and the financial pressures facing the council.
- The service continues to contribute to Thurrock Council's savings; however, it had ensured there was no negative impact on the effort and progress that had been made over recent years. Caseloads and spans of control remained manageable, and the Think Family operating model continued to be embedded and the early help offer to support statutory social work.

- The report highlighted the importance of quality assurance to maintain and improve performance.

During discussions, the following points were raised:

- The Portfolio Holder for Children's Social Care and Early Help thanked staff and partners for their continued support and hard work to ensure children are at the centre of the service.
- Members recognised the importance of the monthly Development Board meetings which hold senior colleagues in the service to account and which were attended by the Portfolio Holder. The Board reported on key metrics such as the auditing of cases and reviews and provided the opportunity for challenge and improvement. This included questioning data within reports, querying areas for improvement and any national issues. Reports were often forward looking and ahead of the curve.
- Collaboration and joint working with partners were highlighted as key and was often the biggest challenge to the service. This included ensuring partners were financially contributing where appropriate.
- It was noted the Portfolio Holder attended fortnightly meetings with the Executive Director for Children's Services and Assistant Director where challenge was actively encouraged to ascertain the direction of performance ahead of the Development Board meetings.
- In relation to Children in Need and Child Protection Plans, Members noted a reduction in referrals which was being monitored closely to ensure the right children were receiving the right support. Multiagency audits were completed to provide a check and balance that thresholds were right across the service.
- Members queried the progress of Initial Health Assessments (IHAs) whereby it was highlighted that there remains an underperformance issue. Regular meetings were held with Health colleagues, and this was escalated to the Executive Director for Children's Services and the equivalent for Health services. A Task and Finish Group was established to monitor performance. Members were reassured that children were registered with GPs and provided with any medical care as required. The barriers to the completion of IHAs included parental permission and missed appointments, however the main concern remained Health capacity. The IHA process was monitored by the Corporate Parenting Committee and the Health and Wellbeing Board.
- Members recognised the priorities of the service; however, these were not attributed to SMART goals and the report did not include an evaluation against these, including achievements or underperformance. It was highlighted key performance data was provided to the Corporate Parenting Committee.

Action: For future Portfolio Holders reports, a summary of the priorities, statistics, and evaluation against these is to be included (possibly a table format).

- Members requested clarification on NEET care leavers and were advised improvements were made, with the Portfolio Holder for Education involved with the dedicated Task and Finish Group. Thurrock were working with 20 individuals to get them back into work or education and remains ongoing.
- In relation to Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), Members were reassured Thurrock tried to place UASC outside of the borough where they have links to family or friends, providing this was safe and appropriate.

Action: The number of UASC transferred outside of the borough is to be provided by Janet Simon.

- The higher reoffending rates outlined within the rate were queried. It was recognised there were very small numbers in Thurrock therefore any changes skew the data. It was difficult to ascertain the reasons why individuals reoffend, however this was being monitored closely, with early intervention and diversion actions being key.
- Members considered funding across the service, including the short breaks provision which had previously shrunk due to the pandemic and the cross cutting savings which were part of the corporate budget focusing on vacancies and agency work.
- It was noted no Social Work posts had been deleted, however there were a small number of redundancies. The business cases were predicated on spans of control and realignment of the service to ensure business needs were met, for example increasing the After Care Service.

RESOLVED:

No recommendations were contained within the report.

The Portfolio Holder for Children's Social Care and Early Help left the meeting at 8.13pm.

44. Childhood Obesity in Thurrock

This item was introduced by Sareena Gill-Dosanjh. Key points included:

- The report was requested by the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16 November 2023 as concerns were raised in relating to the local rates of childhood obesity in Thurrock. The report outlined the local context for overweight and obesity in children and provided an update on the measures in place to tackle to issue. This included the establishment of two strategic groups, the associated stigma of child weight management, the links between ethnicity, socioeconomic deprivation and obesity and the commissioned activity to tackle the issue of obesity.

- Thurrock had concerning rates of overweight and obesity amongst children and adults. Tackling this issue was a priority for the Council, as reflected in the Thurrock Health and Wellbeing Strategy goal to 'Work with communities to reduce obesity in Thurrock'. This included creating a healthier environment through place shaping.
- A whole systems approach was adopted to tackling obesity and was led by Public Health. This approach referred to the network of broad and interlinking factors that contribute to a solution or problem.
- Thurrock's Whole Systems Obesity Strategy had five goals outlined and delivery was based on the previous Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA). The ambitions, goals and deliverables contained within the JSNA remained fit for purpose.

During discussions, the following points were raised:

- Members welcomed the in-depth report and recognised the importance of obesity as an issue for Thurrock.
- It was recognised that the National Childhood Measurement Programme (NCMP) was an opt out scheme for children in Reception and Year 6. Parents of overweight and obese children were likely to withdraw from the programme therefore the obesity rate was potentially higher than reported.
- Members considered various initiatives to reduce the obesity prevalence such as vouchers and schemes for fitness and the promotion of frozen and tinned fruit and vegetables to reduce costs of healthy eating. It was recognised the cost of living crisis was having a considerable impact on physical activity as activities and gyms were often expensive.
- The impact of the pandemic was discussed, including weight gain during lockdown and that protected time was previously given to physical activity in schools.
- Schools were recognised as a key partner in reducing obesity rates. Representatives from two schools attended the Taskforce meetings as part of sharing best practice. Officers were trying to work with academies to raise awareness of the strategic groups, however the challenges were noted. For example, some secondary schools were not offering a full one hour lunch break, however this was split into two 30 minute breaks which was not conducive for healthy eating or physical activity.
- School meals were also raised as a concern as anecdotal feedback suggested healthy foods were more expensive to buy, therefore it was more affordable to buy less healthier options. A change in pricing could be encouraged within schools.
- Members noted the challenges in measuring the impact of the current schemes as each workstream of the Strategy had its own deliverables and target monitoring. Obesity prevalence was therefore used as an indicator, although this was difficult to measure for adults. There was a more standardised approach for children via the NCMP.

- The Committee were advised that over 500 eligible families were not accessing the Healthy Start scheme. The Public Health Team were working with colleagues, including those within Libraries to promote the services. Targeted social media posts were being produced in collaboration with the Communications Team. Unfortunately, Thurrock did not have access to identifiable information for these families, however a broad ward location was assumed based on the obesity data captured within the report.
- Members were reassured that longer term funding for the commissioned services would be via the ring fenced Public Health grant. It was previously funded through COVID outbreak monies.
- Collaboration, best practices, and intelligence gathering were shared across weight management leads on both a regional and national level. In addition, further intelligence was gathered via local means such as Food Banks.
- It was noted the work of the obesity Task and Finish Group was paused and would be considered further post elections.
- As part of Members raising awareness of local opportunities to support the Strategy, residents could be signposted to services, including the council's website.

RESOLVED:

1.1. Members noted the current rates and distribution of childhood obesity in Thurrock and actions taken in support of addressing this issue.

1.2. Members agreed to raise awareness of local opportunities to support the Whole Systems Obesity Strategy and its associated deliverables.

Sareena Gill and Andrea Clement left the meeting at 9.00pm.

45. Presentation on the Designated Schools Grant

This item was introduced by David May. Key points included:

- Education / Schools funding was provided through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). This was a ring-fenced grant governed by the Schools and Early Years Finance Regulations.
- Each of the four funding blocks had a separate formula to determine the funding allocation: Schools Block, Central Schools Services Block, High Needs Block and Early Years Block.
- There was an underspend of £900k due to delays in setting up resource bases in schools. However, there was a good partnership approach with the Schools Forum.
- The key risks for 2024/25 were highlighted, including continuous high needs demand for EHCPs and provider funding fragile for Early Years and the expansion of this offer.

- The Thurrock SEND Strategy and grant application were outlined. The aim was to upskill staff within mainstream schools, review outreach services and the reduction in Independent and Non-maintained Special Schools (INMSS) placement costs. The grant application proposals were approved by the Department for Education DBV Programme Board on 29 February 2024.

During discussions, the following points were raised:

- Members welcomed the report and the Portfolio Holder thanked David for his hard work.
- It was recognised the local offer needed to respond to children's needs therefore this resource was constantly revolving. An annual assessment of each EHCP was completed to consider any changing needs of the child and the expectation was that they do not move schools. There may be increased needs at transition points (from primary to secondary schools) therefore the upskilling of staff within the new school would be key.
- It was highlighted schools budgets are structured on the characteristics of the children in that school. For example, if there are several SEND children within one school and in a higher deprivation area, the budget would be higher. As there was a move to a national funding formula, a notional SEND budget would be provided. However, it was noted Thurrock school budgets 2024/25 have not increased considerably this year therefore they may experience more funding pressures.
- RAAC was recognised as a contributing factor to delays in setting up resource basis in schools. There was a one off saving contributing to the in-year position this year. For next year, there was a forecast deficit of £3m, which was based on £500k deficit carried forward for this year.

RESOLVED:

No recommendations were contained within the presentation.

At 9.15pm, the Chair suspended Council Procedure Rule 11.1 to allow the meeting to continue beyond the 2 ½ hour time limit.

The meeting was adjourned from 9.20pm to 9.27pm

46. Home to School Travel and Transport Policy 2024-25

This item was introduced by Sarah Williams. Key points included:

- The Department for Education published revised Statutory Guidance in June 2023. The Travel to School for Children of Compulsory School Age statutory guidance 2023 replaced the 2014 statutory guidance.
- Changes to the policy included:
 - Separate policies for mainstream and SEND transport;
 - A Travel Assistance Budget within each policy;

- The requirement for parents to apply for the three nearest primary schools and six nearest secondary schools to the home address for mainstream pupils and replace with the 'nearest school' to the home address;
- A parent contribution towards SEND Post 16 travel which would be detailed within the policy;
- Post 16 statement published annually.
- Members were advised that a data mapping system was used and discussed with families at the admissions phase.
- A consultation was undertaken on the 29th of November 2023 and completed on the 19th of January 2024. 124 responses were received, one common response was that the public would like an easy-to-read policy. The remaining responses were highlighted in appendix 1A and 1B.
- Financial support for families for the 16-19 bursary fund were not carried out by Thurrock but signposted.
- Post-16 transport would continue, with contributions towards the cost of this considered. This included £6,631k per student for local provision and over £16k for those traveling further. Parents would be notified as to how to apply for this funding. The assessments would be carried out by the educational establishment.
- Members were informed that 101 post-16 students were currently in receipt of transport. Of these, 32 were from low-income families.
- Benchmarking within the eastern region was completed – most have contributions in place. The highest contribution provided in neighbouring areas was over £15k.
- The report recommended option 2 - accept the proposed changes outlined in section 2.15 and introduce a contribution towards SEND Post 16 travel. This would bring Thurrock in line with other council's that have already introduced a contribution towards SEND Post 16 transport.

During discussions, the following points were raised:

- Members questioned whether parents changed their child's school that was further away, if they were still eligible for support. The Committee were advised that parents have the right to choose any school. If it is not the nearest, then they would not be eligible for support.
- The bursary rate would not be known in advance by Thurrock and was means tested.
- There were potential financial risks, and efforts would be made to make it clear to families that they must apply for their nearest school. When placed elsewhere, the expectation was that they would not stay on waiting list.
- Members questioned whether higher charges for families that can afford the contribution, or a sliding scale was considered. They were advised that charges were considered for all, however for lower income families it would be lower. Exploration of options to avoid burden on low-income families would be covered by a bursary.

Officers would be liaising with those families although the assessment would not be conducted by Thurrock Council. The fund was up to £1200.

- The consultation of post-16 travel was not a statutory duty. Members questioned whether the public's views were listened to. Members were reassured that they were listened to, and the public agreed with a variety of the proposed changes. For example, the travel assistance budget.
- The Committee were advised that the policy went to Cabinet in July 2020, however it was not introduced at the time although it was approved.
- Members questioned page 46 (section 2.13) on young people with EHCPs. The Committee were advised there were plans to introduce 19-25 contributions as there was a statutory responsibility. The Chair added that this could encourage pupils to progress into higher education.
- The Parent Governor supported this policy and questioned the consequences if parents did not pay. The Committee were reassured they would engage with those families to support them and consider different payment options or collect up front. Unfortunately, until it was implemented, it would be difficult to assume, however transport would not be stopped immediately. It would be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.
- It was noted the report was to be reviewed by Cabinet on 13 March therefore the Portfolio for Education would provide a verbal update on the Committee's views.

RESOLVED:

The proposed recommendations below to commence from 1st April 2024 for the start of the academic year 2024/25 for new families applying for travel assistance.

A vote was held, with all Members in agreement for recommendation 1.1.

1.1 Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends that Cabinet agrees and adopts the new individual SEND and Mainstream Home to School Travel and Transport Policies 2024-2025 for statutory school age pupils aged 5 to 16 years.

For recommendation 1.2 (below), a vote was held, with two Members in agreement and three against. The Parent Governor representative indicated her agreement, however, was not advised of her rights to formally vote. Recommendation 1.2 was therefore not supported by the Committee.

1.2 Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends that Cabinet agrees to implement a weekly parent contribution towards SEND Post 16 travel assistance each year of £23.69, this is reduced to £11.85 for low-income families.

47. Overview of Responsibilities of Portfolio Holder for Education report

This item was introduced by Councillor Adam Carter (Portfolio Holder). Key points included:

- All partners were thanked for their continued support and hard work.
- Academies accepted the challenge posed by RAAC and rose to the occasion.
- The Portfolio Holder advised he visited many schools and acknowledged there was a requirement of improvements to scrutiny.

During discussions, the following points were raised:

- The achievement of schools was highlighted however Members raised that secondary schools in Thurrock were currently 2nd for the bottom within the East of England and wanted to know what was done to address this.
- Members were assured that performance was due to three of the borough's schools designated as inadequate and requires improvement. These schools had not been re-brokered for two years which was disappointing. Thurrock remained the strong critical friend, however, was unable to dictate to academies.
- Members raised that scrutiny was not working and highlighted that the current Portfolio Holder for Education was the previous chair of the Committee. The Portfolio Holder advised the Committee of the challenges and ever-changing situation of the rebrokering of the three schools and that a previous provider fell through, however, a resolution continued to be sought.
- Questions arose on RAAC, and the Portfolio Holder for Education advised he did not visit schools affected prior to the November 2023 Overview and Scrutiny meeting. Members raised that guidance was issued over the summer and was changed which put pressure on schools. Each Head Teacher confirmed it had an impact on children's learning, stressing the importance of site visits.
- Members raised issues with the education attainment gap. The Committee were informed that extra support was being put in place for transitions and recognised the Key Stage four results remained below targets. This was due to missed education during the pandemic, and they were still catching up. The impact of RAAC situation would also need to be taken into consideration. There was also a cohort of children struggling to get back to school.

Action: A report on the education attainment gap and the work with schools to improve this is to be considered within the next municipal year as part of the proposed changes to the overview and scrutiny function.

- Members questioned the 8% of settings that did not engage with the School Effectiveness Team. They were informed that the service delivered the statutory responsibility of the council around delivering support and advice to settings to improve.
- Members raised that Thurrock was higher than statistical neighbours for EHCPs. 20-week assessments were improving, and the service was now fully staffed which had made an impact.
- Members questioned the data on Elective Home Education (EHE) children and if this was moving in the right direction. It was noted there had been an uptick since the pandemic, however parents had a right to consider EHE. Furthermore, there was a strong school attendance and support team in place.
- Member asked for clarity in relation to School Ofsted reports. 90% of Thurrock's schools rated good (95% of primary Schools and 76% of secondary schools). Members were reassured that Thurrock continued to have a close relationship with academies. Members were encouraged to review the individual Ofsted reports for specific performance results.
- It was highlighted that the SEND in focus week commenced next week (w/c 18 March 2024).

RESOLVED:

No recommendations were contained within the report.

David May left the meeting at 10.36pm.

48. School Capital Programme Update 2023/24

This item was introduced by Sarah Williams. Key points included:

- Cabinet approval would be sought on one of the options proposed within the report including the approval of additional spend that was required for the expansion of Tilbury Pioneer Academy.
- On 15th March 2023, Cabinet approved a budget of £3M along with the procurement process to appoint a design and multi-disciplinary project team to undertake required surveys and develop a detailed cost plan for the refurbishment of the part of the old block that was on the Tilbury Pioneer site that was due to be demolished. Following this detailed work and the increase in cost, Cabinet needed to reconsider whether new build is more feasible than refurbishment.
- The expansion works for Tilbury Pioneer Academy would be funded from the Department for Education (DFE) basic need grant (not Council general fund), which had sufficient funds available to cover either option presented within the report.
- Cabinet approval would also be sought for the approval of £1M to proceed with works to convert a council owned building in Northview Avenue, Tilbury to a secondary SEMH (Social, Emotional, Mental Health) provision, which would be run by Olive Academy. The works would be funded from the DfE SEN Capital Grant (not Council general fund), which had sufficient funds available.

- Additionally, this report provided an update on current capital projects managed by Thurrock Council which formed part of the current school capital programme outlining the progress that had been achieved since the last report to Cabinet in March 2023.
- The current programme aimed to deliver sufficient pupil places for 2024/25 academic years in mainstream and SEN provision.

During discussions, the following points were raised:

- Members welcomed the report and advised that the new build was the preferred option (1.2)
- Members questioned whether green areas of the school would be lost and were advised that the existing building would be demolished which would give the green space back.
- Members requested that contingencies be put in place for the prevention of extra costs for this project. The Committee were reassured that this was considered within the budget, as well as inflated prices, however it was recognised there were challenges to mitigate issues outside of Thurrock's control.

RESOLVED:

The Committee supported the recommendation of 1.2 rather than 1.1.

Cabinet to approve recommendation 1.2 set out below:

1.2 To approve a budget of £4.75M budget for the new build works to allow for the expansion of Tilbury Pioneer Academy to be funded from the School's Basic Need capital funding 2023/24

Recommendations 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6 were agreed and supported by the Committee.

1.3 To approve the commencement of the procurement process in accordance with Council & UK procurement procedures to vary the appointment and scope of works to be undertaken by the Multi Discipline design team for the Tilbury Pioneer Expansion Project and appoint the Principal Contractors to take forward the proposed desired scheme.

1.4 That authority be delegated to the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Education Portfolio Holder, to enter into any form of agreement following the award of the agreements arising from 1.1 or 1.2 above in compliance with the Council's procurement regulations.

1.5 To approve a £1M budget for alternation works at Northview Avenue , Tilbury to allow for a secondary SEMH provision to be funded from SEN Capital government grant 2023/24.

1.6 Note the recent in-year accommodation works that have commenced and completed in order to ensure sufficient pupil places for 2023/2024.

Sarah Williams left the meeting 10.57pm

49. Work Programme

This was the last meeting of the municipal year therefore any items for the next municipal year would be considered in line with the proposed changes to the overview and scrutiny structure.

The Chair thanked the Committee members and officers for all their hard work and contributions this year.

The full recording of this meeting can be viewed from the following link:
[Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Tuesday 12 March 2024, 7:00pm - Thurrock Council committee meeting webcasts \(public-i.tv\)](#)

The meeting finished at 10.59 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**