

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 2 March 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Elizabeth Rigby (Chair), Steve Liddiard (Vice-Chair), Daniel Chukwu, Barry Johnson, Sue Shinnick and Jennifer Smith

Annie Guidotti, Thurrock Open Door
Sharon Smith, Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association
Jenny Josling, Vice Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association

Apologies: Shelia Murphey, Director of Children's Services
Rafael Antunes, Chair, Children in Care Council
Christopher Bennett, Vice Chair, Children in Care Council

In attendance: Joseph Tynan, Assistant Director of Children's Services
Naintara Khosla, Strategic Lead for Looked After Children
Dan Jones, Service Manager for Fostering and Adoption
Mandy Moore, Strategic Lead for Business Intelligence
Keeley Pullen, Head Teacher for the Virtual School
Kenna-Victoria Healey, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being live streamed to the Council's online webcast channel.

33. Minutes

The minutes of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 5 January 2021 were approved as a correct record.

34. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of Urgent Business.

35. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

36. Children's Social Care Performance

The Strategic Lead for Business Intelligence presented the report on pages 15 to 32 of the agenda to Members which provided information on the performance across children looked after and after-care. In doing so she touched on a number of topics including the number of children looked after,

care leavers, looked after children missing episodes, Initial Health Assessments, the number of children adopted, permanency planning, Care Leavers in Education Employment or Training, and Fostering placements.

Councillor Smith thanked officers for the report and enquired as to the percentage of children who were returned to live with their birth parents following foster care. It was explained unfortunately officers did not have the information to hand however it would be circulated outside of the meeting.

Members enquired as to the measures in place to reduce the number of missing episodes for looked after children. The Strategic Lead for Looked After Children explained each missing episode had been recorded within the report and this could sometimes be as little as half an hour to an hour where a child or young person was late home or not home and passed a curfew. She continued to explain there was a strong robust process in place along with joint working with a multi-agency partnership. The Committee further heard there were weekly missing meetings with partners such as Essex police and liaison with the Thurrock community safety colleagues to discuss any missing episodes.

It was enquired as to the reasons some children went missing and officers advised having spoken and engaged with young people sometimes, they found it difficult to be away from their birth family and sometimes they just wanted some time on their own. It was explained there were a number of reasons for a child to go missing, however each child had a Return Home Interview with an independent person, someone who was not be their social worker, so to be able to understand why the child went missing.

RESOLVED that Members of the Corporate Parenting Committee;

1.1 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.

37. Health Assessments Corporate Parenting Committee

The Strategic Lead for Looked After Children presented the report and in doing so updated Members on Thurrock's timeliness of Initial Health Assessment and Review Health Assessments.

She continued to advise that when a child or young person came into care, they must have an Initial Health Assessment, this was a statutory requirement for all looked after children. The health assessment was to be completed within 20 working days of the child coming into care, with Social Care providing a referral within five working days and notifying health colleagues of a child becoming looked after.

Members heard how in October 2020 twelve Initial Health Assessment appointments were required and all but one was completed within the timescale, in November 2020 three out of twelve Initial Health Assessment appointments were delayed, two of these were the children who were placed out of the Thurrock area, and in December 2020 there were two out of six children who did not receive their Initial Health Assessment within timescale. Officers explained that moving forwards they were committed to reaching 90% plus of all Initial Health Assessments to be held within timescale and were working closely with health colleagues to ensure this happened.

Councillor Chukwu enquired as to why there was a delay in the health assessment as mentioned within the report. The Strategic Lead for Looked After Children explained that the children in question were placed outside of the area and therefore escalation was made to the health team where the children were residing highlighting the importance of their Initial Health Assessment. She continued to explain if necessary and there were appointments available, Thurrock children would be brought back into the area for their assessment to be completed.

RESOLVED:

That Corporate Parenting Members noted the areas of improvement in Children's Social Care and the work that is being undertaken with Health colleagues to ensure good and improving performance with IHAs and RHAs.

38. Support Provided to Foster Carers during Covid-19

The Service Manager for Fostering and Adoption presented the report to members on pages 41 to 46 of the agenda. In doing so he explained that Foster Carers had a unique role to play throughout the pandemic. They were supporting children not only being placed into care but also with being in and out of school and the fostering team were doing the best they could to support each foster family's individual needs.

He continued by thanking all of Thurrock's Foster Carers for their continued support and for opening their homes to the borough's children who needed it most.

The Chair of Committee Councillor Rigby, thanked officers for the report and echoed officers thanks to Foster Carers for all of the support and care they were giving to the young people in their care.

RESOLVED

That Corporate Parenting Members were informed about the support provided to Foster Carers approved by Thurrock Council during the Covid-19 Pandemic

39. Update on the actions of the Virtual School service during lockdown

The Headteacher of the virtual school for looked after children presented the report to members which provided an overview of the work the virtual school had been doing to promote the educational outcomes of looked after children during the lockdown period.

Members heard all early year's settings had remained open to all children and were currently expected to operate as normal, it was explained they were currently 265 young people aged between 3 and 18 who are eligible for accessing educational placements at different establishments across the borough.

It was further explained for preschool and school age children, social workers had been discussing with families the individual circumstances surrounding school attendance, a joint decision had been made with parents to consider the educational need for looked after children in getting them back into the classroom. Most post 16 college students had been offered online educational packages by the colleges with some students being able to access face-to-face learning and having access to their college's pastoral team should it be required.

The Headteacher of the virtual school continued to advise Members that personal education plan meetings were continuing to take place as normal to ensure that the statutory part of the care plan was maintained and education was formally monitored throughout this time. This meant that teachers were able to monitor attendance, educational targets and assessment data to help promote good educational outcomes.

The Chair of the Committee Councillor the Rigby enquired how looked after children were performing with regard to education and learning. It was explained that children were missing their friends at school and the social side of school, and although schools are finding it challenging to complete assessments with the lockdown, however measures had been put in place for these to continue.

RESOLVED

That the Corporate Parenting Committee used the information provided in this report to evaluate the response of the Virtual School team and to scrutinise the support that is being provided to our service users.

40. Corporate Parenting Communicating with Members

The Strategic Lead for Looked After Children addressed Members outlining to them the roles and responsibilities of being a Corporate Parent. She continued by explaining Thurrock had a good approach to its Corporate Parenting role, providing information to Members and looked after children, their progress and the performance of the children look after, placements and after-care service.

She continued by stating to be a good Corporate Parent required the understanding and knowledge to know what was happening to young people and children within the council's care. For Thurrock this meant insuring information collected by agencies about children in care and the care experience by young people, was used to the best advantage of its young people and therefore shared information with partners appropriately.

It was commented by Members that the Councillor role for being a Corporate Parent was not understood by all Elected Members. It was therefore suggested that mandatory training should be scheduled for all newly Elected Members. Councillor Johnson commented that he had visited the Children in Care Council in his role as Portfolio Holder for Housing and should he continue with this role he was more than happy to attend another meeting to discuss any issue with the young people who attended. The representative for Thurrock Open Door who also attended the Children in Care Council welcomed Members to attend their meetings which were held monthly, and it was agreed details of these meeting would be circulated outside of the meeting.

During discussions Members heard how officers were focusing on new marketing strategies such as social media to advertise for new foster carers. Members heard that the foster carer community was very supportive of each other and officers hoped to increase this. The Vice-Chair of the One Team Foster Care Association assured Members social media outlets were used for advertising and the links for such advertising could be shared. She continued by saying she was pleased to see the positive nature in seeking new platforms to advertise on and was excited to see the new branding launch.

RESOLVED that:

- 1.1 Members are updated on their Corporate Parenting Responsibilities.**
- 1.2 Considered and noted the options for raising the profile of Corporate Parenting activities in Thurrock.**

41. Corporate Parenting Committee Work Programme 2020/2021

The Committee discussed the work programme, and agreed to a number of reports being included on the Work Programme including:

- Childrens Service Performance Report
- Update on the Youth Offending Service, the Youth Justice Plan and the role of the Service for Children Looked After
- Report for Members on Missing Children, Child Exploitation, Return Home Interviews and Contextual Safeguarding focussed on Children Looked After
- Thurrock Fostering Service: Recruitment

RESOLVED

That the Corporate Parenting Committee agreed for the Work Programme to be updated and include the reports discussed.

The meeting finished at 8.19 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