

**MINUTES of the meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 1 February 2012 at 7.00pm.**

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- Present:** Councillors Angie Gaywood (Chair), Mike Revell, Cathy Kent, Diana Hale, James Halden, Ben Maney,
- Additional Members:** Mr A McPherson – Parent/Governor Representative  
Mrs P Wilson – RC Church Representative
- Apologies:** Mr S Cray – Parent/Governor Representative  
Rev D Rollins – Church of England Representative  
Councillor S MacPherson and M Coxshall
- In attendance:** Ms B Foster – Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes  
Ms C Littleton–Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes  
Neale Laurie – Safeguarding & Child Protection Coordinator  
Paul Coke – Service manager (Children and Families)  
Roland Minto – Service Manager (Placement Support)  
Rubina Mazher – Service Manager (Family Support)  
David Peplow – Chair of Local Safeguarding Childrens Board  
Ms E Sheridan – Electoral & Democratic Services
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**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors S MacPherson and M Coxshall plus members Rev D Rollins and Steve Cray. Amy Weir from the Local Safeguarding Children's Board also sent apologies.

**2. ADDITIONAL ITEMS**

The Chair agreed to receive an additional item of urgent business with regard to the Fees and Charges 2012-2013 for Early Years, Families and Communities. This item was discussed before Item 4.

Members had received the report one day prior to the meeting following the request from Corporate Overview and Scrutiny and copies of the report and appendices were circulated at the meeting. The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes outlined the report and appendices. The fees and charges had previously been considered at Corporate Overview and Scrutiny and Members of Corporate Overview and Scrutiny recommended that it would be beneficial for the item to be discussed at Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee for additional scrutiny.

The Services subject to scrutiny were outlined by the Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes. These services were the Schools Catering Service, Thurrock Adult Education Service, Grangewaters Outdoor Education Centre, Play Service After School Club Provision and Nursery Provision.

In particular, the benchmarking and Equality Impact on Grangewaters Outdoor Education Centre was outlined and the increase in fees and charges for the Play Service After School Club was highlighted as required to take account of the need to sustain the club prior to a commissioning process being undertaken and also to ensure that it is not run at a loss. Benchmarking of local charges was undertaken and the proposed charges are in line with those charged locally. The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes described that the Equality Impact Assessment indicated no adverse effects which could not be mitigated and that the service would actively promote information about Tax Credits to offset the proposed increases.

Councillor M Revell queried the information supplied in respect of Grangewaters Outdoor Education Centre and highlighted that information regarding income and expenditure had not been supplied. This information had been previously requested in relation to the Alternative Model of Service Delivery item at the last meeting. The request for budget information had not been reflected accurately in the minutes. Cllr Hale responded that these are operational figures and would not normally be presented and that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny had requested Fees and Charges not operational accounts. Cllr Revell requested that accounts are provided and the Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes agreed to provide the requested information.

Councillor J Halden asked for further clarification of figures in relation to Local Authority run Nursery Provision. The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes responded that benchmarking had been undertaken against private providers. The Member queried the outsourcing process and lack of evidence that this had been undertaken. The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes responded that the increase in fees and charges is the first step in making the services ready for commissioning from an external provider. The Chair outlined that outsourcing is not always effective and highlighted the shortfalls of providers in the Stanford and Corringham areas. Councillor Halden asked if the procurement service had been consulted and the Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes agreed that they would be involved at all stages of any future commissioning and tendering process and were routinely consulted on these matters.

**Resolved:**

**That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers the proposed fees and charges set out in the report in the context of the Councils Medium Term Financial Strategy and that the minutes of the meeting be reported to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny.**

### **3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

#### a) Interests

Councillor Gaywood declared a personal interest as she has children attending Arthur Bugler Junior School and St. Clere's School. She is a Governor at Arthur Bugler Infant School; she has a disabled son in receipt of special care and is the Chair of the East Tilbury and St. Clere's Schools Collaboration Group. She is an SEN Parent Governor at St. Clere's School and a stakeholder member of Thurrock CVS. She is a member of the Corporate Parenting Group and a parent member of Thurrock Family Voice.

Councillor Cathy Kent declared a personal interest as she has children attending St Thomas Primary School, Grays Convent School and Grays Media & Arts School. She is a Parent Governor at Grays Convent School. She is also a member of the Admissions Forum.

Mrs P Wilson declared a personal interest as she is the Chair of Governors at St Thomas's Primary School.

Councillor Halden declared a personal interest in relation to the item on Fees and Charges as he has a friend who runs a Day Care Nursery.

Mr A McPherson declared a personal interest as he has a child attending Aveley Primary School and is a Parent Governor at Aveley Primary School.

#### b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

### **4. MINUTES**

The Minutes from the meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 13 December 2011, were approved as a correct record subject to the following amendments and queries:

Councillor M Revell asked that

a) 'Members' be changed to 'Member' in relation to Item 7 of the Minutes, specifically referring to Grangewaters Outdoor Education Centre. (Page 9 of the minutes)

b) the minutes reflect that Councillor Revell had requested an income and expenditure account for the Centre to be provided.

Councillor C Kent asked that the reference to apologies from Councillor W Curtis be removed as Councillor Curtis is a substitute member and was not due to be in attendance at the meeting.

The Chair amended page 6 of Item 4, Item 7, Growth Proposal final paragraph to replace the word Ombudsmen with Ofsted. The paragraph now reads:

Members of the Committee requested a copy of the Ofsted Monitoring visit and action plan report be circulated.

## **5. SAFEGUARDING AND CHILD PROTECTION**

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes introduced this report to highlight the Council's statutory lead role in Child Protection and introduced the relevant Service Managers, Rubina Mazher and Neale Laurie. The aim of the report was to inform Members of what the service must deliver and provide an overview. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes introduced the Service Managers to the Committee and the new chair of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board, David Peplow.

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes asked Members to note that paragraph 3.5 should state that the OFSTED inspection took place in November 2010, not 2011 as reported.

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes outlined that the service deals with a large number of referrals of a very serious nature and confirmed that the workload of social workers had now been reduced to agreed threshold levels. Members were informed that the number of children on Child Protection Plans is higher than the national average.

The Ofsted arrangements were highlighted and Members heard that new inspection arrangements for unannounced inspections of child protection work will commence in May 2012 but that the existing arrangements for a 10 day inspection in every local authority will still run until July 2012 and therefore Thurrock will receive an unannounced inspection before the end of July 2012.

Members noted that the Local Safeguarding Children's Board report (Item 6 of the agenda) was an overdue report to the Committee and that Professor Munro's recommendations for looking at Serious Case Reviews was that the existing model was governed by hindsight and attributed blame and recommended a new style of review.

A Member queried paragraph 2.3 of the report in relation to the information supplied in table 3.2. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes outlined that the table of information is compiled from historical data and anomalies may be present due to the introduction of the ICS recording system. The Member questioned this further and asked if the recording problem was flagged at the time. Members of the Committee heard that it was not possible to further query the data as it is as it was recorded. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes agreed to investigate the data and if possible provide any further clarification and information to assist the Member in understanding the detail.

A Member queried the higher than national average of cases referred to in paragraph 3.2 and asked if the service record of dealing with high end cases could lead to a danger that low end cases progress to high end cases. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes confirmed that this is a possibility.

A Member asked for explanation as to how unborn children were referred to the Service. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes outlined the preventative process which involved working with Basildon Hospital who identified the unborn children at risk and enabled the service to act quickly and start care proceedings as soon as the child was born. Mothers presenting with a previous history of abuse, domestic abuse, neglect and drug and alcohol issues were amongst the main categories of referral.

A Member queried the BME information and underrepresentation and asked what work is underway within the Service. Members of the Committee heard that BME families are doing well in Thurrock and they would not expect to see large numbers with Child Protection Plans. There had been an increase of families moving to Thurrock on Child Protection Plans and this was outlined in the report. The Service Manager reported that they are focussing on exploring BME connections and diversity this month and it was noted that the team is comprised of a very diverse workforce which is a strength when conducting assessments.

A Member stated that it was important to remember that deaths of children was not something that always happened to somebody else and reflected on a previous death within Thurrock many years ago. He welcomed the new Chair of the LSCB and discussed the sexual exploitation of children and the need to distribute information to parents. The Chair of the LSCB reported that work is underway with the Children's Commissioner and the Department of Education and all authorities have been advised to work on the basis that they have a problem unless they can prove otherwise as there is currently a lack of evidence about this form of abuse. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes informed the Committee of a conference held in Thurrock in December which highlighted that the vulnerable children who are most

at risk of becoming victims are less likely to have support from their parents. Councillor D Hale stated that there had been 8 serious case reviews since 1998, some were deaths from natural causes but that in other serious cases, Members had agreed to be called in for an urgent pre-meeting. Officers confirmed that they were happy to continue this practice.

Members questioned why there is a large number of families moving into Thurrock. The Committee heard that this may be due to fleeing Domestic Violence and also perhaps the introduction of the Welfare Reform.

A Member highlighted that there was a perceived lack of feedback to teachers who had made a referral. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes and the Service Manager were disappointed to hear this but reassured Members that every single referral made was subject to a process that ensured that the person making the referral received an outcome letter.

A Member asked for clarification on the transfer of children on Child Protection Plans to Thurrock. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes explained the process of how children on Plans are protected when they leave Thurrock and that this applies if children move to Thurrock on a temporary basis. Proof of permanent residency is required before a child is given a Thurrock Child Protection Plan.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1) That Members note the content of the report: and**
- 2) That Members continue to monitor this service area.**

## **6. LOCAL SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN'S BOARD (LSCB)**

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes introduced the covering report and highlighted that the LSCB report takes Members to March 2011 and is therefore overdue.

Members of the Committee heard that an external inspection was carried out in 2010. The report highlighted the work which was undertaken, Members of the Board and their attendance record. It was noted that an Elected Member is on the LSCB Board and the Director of People's Services.

Serious Case Reviews were highlighted in the report and Members heard that there had been no SCR's during 2010/11. All Child Deaths were however examined by the pan Essex Child Death Overview Panel.

The Chair of the LSCB, Chief Inspector David Peplow was introduced and outlined his background to Members of the Committee. The Chair of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee welcomed David Peplow.

The LSCB Chair asked Members to note the existing priorities of the LSCB and informed Members that a more timely report would be presented to the Committee. A development day with the LSCB was planned and key questions would inform a new set of priorities for the Board.

Members discussed the change of structure away from the Corporate Parenting Group (now a Committee) and highlighted that there was a clear way for Members and senior officers to be a legal and moral corporate parent for Looked After Children.

A Member raised the issue of attendance at Full Board Meetings of the LSCB and how this could be improved. The Chair of the LSCB outlined that there were four meetings per year and in particular Education was a statutory member. There had been no attendance from Education at the meetings in the period covered by the report. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes outlined that attendance should be consistent and there had been no feedback as to the reason for non-attendance. The Chair of LSCB agreed that action needs to be taken and a representative appointed at a Chief Officer Level.

A Member questioned whether the priorities had been set as a result of evidential data. The Chair of the LSCB stated that he is presenting the report on behalf of the previous Chair and would need to clarify from previous reports and minutes how the priorities were arrived at.

**RESOLVED that Members note the content of the report and affirm the council's continuing commitment to providing strong and effective leadership of safeguarding in Thurrock.**

## **7. CHILDREN IN CARE**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes presented this report which summarised information regarding Thurrock's Looked after Children and their placement services and introduced the relevant Service Managers, Roland Minto and Paul Coke.

The Committee heard that Thurrock Fostering Service is particularly strong but was recently put at a disadvantage due to an increase in payments made to foster carers paid by Essex County Council. Members also heard about the work of the Children in Care Council and the recent LILAC inspection (Leading Improvements for Looked After Children). One particular recommendation from the Inspection

has already been implemented and Open Door have been engaged to provide independent support to the Children in Care Council.

The Committee were also informed that there has been a national increase in the number of Looked After Children, not just in Thurrock.

A Member highlighted that ten young people were studying for a degree and asked how many were asylum seekers. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes and the Service Manager responded that this is not a benchmarked figure but reported that they believed four of the ten young people had been unaccompanied asylum seekers. There is an obligation to provide a bursary for these young people and to ensure they have leave to remain and apply for relevant grants. The Service Manager agreed to provide benchmarking information from statistical neighbours.

A Member highlighted the financial pressures in relation to payments to foster carers and how this will affect the budget. The Service Manager outlined the need to look at how Thurrock manages the current resources and look at other positives that encourage people to become foster parents and in particular highlight the benefits of fostering with Thurrock. For example this could be items such as leisure passes or advantages of fostering with a smaller authority as opposed to a larger authority such as Essex. The need to look after loyal foster carers was highlighted and the pressure of dealing with an ageing profile of foster carers was noted.

A Member questioned the racial groupings listed in paragraph 2.2 of the report and the Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes responded that the descriptions are those of the people themselves.

The Chair of the Committee highlighted the work of the Adoption Panel and raised the concern of late intervention of a family member, plus the delays of children reaching the Panel. The financial pressures of adoption and Special Guardianship Orders were discussed.

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes explained that a Special Guardianship Order was a private law order and the Authority had a statutory duty to provide assistance and support in such cases. This extended beyond the child to their parents and family members. Members of the Committee heard that the number of adoptions had decreased but this was countered by an increase in Special Guardianship Orders.

In relation to the delays experienced by children in reaching the Adoption Panel, the Committee heard that an Audit of cases was currently underway to review where improvements could be made.

**RESOLVED that**



- 1. Members note the content of the report; and**
- 2. Members continue their support to the Corporate Parenting Group; and**
- 3. Members continue their support to the Children in Care Council; and**
- 4. Minutes of the Corporate Parenting Committee to be reported back to Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny**

## **8. WORK PROGRAMME**

The work programme was reviewed and members noted the additional work undertaken to cross reference the programme with the CYPP as previously requested plus the additional column relating to the reason why the item had been brought to Committee.

Members asked for clarification of the timescale for the visit to the PRU and Grangewaters. The Clerk agreed to liaise with the Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes and email Members of the Committee.

The outstanding item in relation to the Admissions Forum was discussed and the Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes was requested to provide an update.

Members of the Committee were asked to consider potential agenda items for the forthcoming Municipal Year and inform the Chair, Vice Chair and Clerk.

**The meeting finished at 9.05 pm**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIRMAN**

**DATE**

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact  
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or alternatively e-mail [esh Sheridan@thurrock.gov.uk](mailto:esh Sheridan@thurrock.gov.uk)**