

**MINUTES of the meeting of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny  
Committee held on 29 January 2013 at 7:00pm**

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**Present:** Councillors D Hale (Chair), M Coxshall (substitute for S Little), C Curtis, C Kent, J Halden

**Apologies:** Councillors C Baldwin and S Little  
Mrs P Wilson

**In attendance:** Mr S Cray – Parent Governor Representative  
Mr A McPherson – Parent Governor Representative  
Revd D Barlow – Church of England Representative Councillor  
O Gerrish – Portfolio Holder  
J Olsson – Head of People Services  
F Taylor – Head of Legal and Democratic Services  
S Clark – Head of Finance  
S Abrahall – Finance Officer  
C Littleton – Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes  
B Foster – Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes  
R Harris – Head of Commissioning  
A Cotgrove – LSCB and Partnership Manager  
D Peplow – Independent Chair of LSCB  
E Sheridan - Clerk

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**The Chair informed those present that the meeting was Audio Recorded**

**11 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillors C Baldwin and S Little and from Mrs P Wilson.

The Chair welcomed Revd D Barlow to the meeting.

**12 MINUTES**

The Minutes of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 11 December 2012, were approved as a correct record.

**13 URGENT ITEMS**

None  
Colour appendices and alternative budget proposals were tabled at the meeting

## **14 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Cllr J Halden declared a non pecuniary interest in respect of the alternative proposals, he had been invited to the London premises of Career Academies UK.

Councillor C Kent declared 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.

The Chair took item 6 of the agenda before item 5.

## **15 SAFEGUARDING AND CHILD PROTECTION**

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes introduced the report. The Committee noted that it was presented annually and members were invited to consider if they wished to receive it more frequently. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes reminded Members that the Authority had the Ofsted Inspection last year and received grades of good but it was not good throughout and areas of future development had been highlighted.

Members were informed that Munro report challenged all authorities to look at Child Protection and the Services have looked at changes in Thurrock and financial comparative figures against other Local Authorities. The Children's Improvement Board had highlighted some of the most important factors as outlined in paragraph 5.3 of the report.

Members questioned the Ofsted Inspection and recommendations and asked for follow up reports where necessary. Officers clarified that the Ofsted action plan had been previously brought to the Committee, the requirements had been met and they are now completing audits. This information can be brought to Committee if required by Members.

Members queried the numbers shown in indicator CP15 and officers clarified the work undertaken 2 years previously and how they are working to priority cases.

Officers reassured Members that there is a clear quality assurance approach in the service now and actions are constantly considered to look at the trends and in comparison to other council's. Thurrock is carrying out a higher proportion of investigations and have a higher percentage of children on child protection plans than is the case for other councils.

Councillor Halden outlined his confusion that we are apparently in line with the amount of child protection plans based on the four criteria – sexual, emotional and physical abuse and neglect. However we seem to have a significantly higher amount per 1000 people, which may suggest that we are not in line.

Officers outlined some of the figures and gave an undertaking to follow up after the meeting.

The Director of People Services reassured members that partnership relations and system security in Thurrock is very strong and the systems are in place to encourage discussion and challenge from partner agencies in order to maximise the protection of children. The Chair referenced that when the initial work was prioritised very few cases were returned through the system.

Members discuss CP3 and the head of Care and Targeted Outcomes responded to members questions detailing child protection plans and the reasons and length of time children stay on the plans.

Members agreed that they would like further information on child protection plans at next meeting.

Members questioned officers on missing children. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes outlined the work of the Children's Panel and the ability the Panel has had to make some referrals to police.

**RESOLVED that:**

- a) Members agree the contents of the report**
- b) Members considered whether Child Protection should feature more frequently than annually in the agenda of Overview and Scrutiny.**

**16 THURROCK LSCB ANNUAL REPORT 2011-2012**

The Chair invited David Peplow, Independent Chair of the LSCB to introduce the report. The Independent Chair informed Members that he took over the role on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2012 and the work of the previous arrangements are shown in the report. The previous Independent Chair was thanked for her work along with the interim support arrangements provided by the staff. Alan Cotgrove was introduced as a permanent member of the Board.

The Independent Chair of the LSCB detailed the development day held in March 2012 and informed Members of the changes outlined for 2012/13 and changes to sub group structure including performance management.

The report confirmed that there had been no Serious Case Reviews in the period it covered although audit and inspection on random cases had been carried out. Members attention was drawn to the Priorities for 2012/13 as outlined on page 30 of the report.

The Independent Chair of the LSCB outlined changes to LSCB, including rebranding the partnership. Sample documents were tabled as examples.

Members questioned the finance report and the contribution provided by the Local Authority. Members were informed there was a significant contribution which paid the costs of the support team. Officers confirmed that the support team is a council liability as staff members are employed on council conditions and page 7 of the report shows the expenditure costs. The Head of Finance was asked to check the finance position and officers noted that future reports should clearly show the costs for the council.

Members questioned if the random audits showed that there was a robust procedure for Serious Case Reviews. Officers outlined the procedure for Serious Case Reviews and confirmed the audits were part of the LSCB performance management process.

Councillor Hale asked and received assurance that the rebranding of LSCB was not expensive and highlighted concerns re the use of upper case letters.

The report was formally accepted by Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

**RESOLVED that**

- a) The committee note progress made on Children's Safeguarding**
- b) The committee comment on the report.**

David Peplow was asked to provide the name of a person to be a co-opted member of the Committee.

David Peplow and Alan Cotgrove left the meeting at 7.55pm

**17 BUDGET 2013/14 – 2014-15, SAVINGS AND CAPITAL PROPOSALS**

The Chair outlined the order in which the proposals would be taken. The Cabinets proposals were taken first, followed by the opposition proposals and then the Capital Programme.

The Head of Finance introduced the budget report and outlined the requirements of the council to find substantial savings.

Members asked the Head of Finance to clarify the obligations of the Committee in relation to the savings to be made.

**Page 79**

**The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced the proposal (page 79 of the Agenda). The seven bullet points were labelled A – F for ease of reference.**

Members discussed the proposal in depth and raised concerns with A, F and E. In particular, concerns were raised with A and F as they affected the ability to support vulnerable pupils and E because this affected children already at bottom of pile and there is a risk they will become looked after children.

Members discussed the EHE (elective home education) and traveller children and officers clarified the budget line and areas of responsibility and that this is a checking post.

Whilst still concerned with E, reference was made to the proposal on page 98 and the impact on the support for traveller children. Members were informed that the DSG through the schools forum would be asked to pick this up.

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes informed members that there was no assurance that the schools forum would undertake this work and recommended that this saving only be taken if it is not picked up by the schools forum.

Members robustly discussed EHE and traveller children and the Director of People Services outlined that DSG is an education budget and any teacher or education support worker has a broad welfare duty. This does not replace the statutory checking duty in the first bid. If the statutory checking capacity is reduced it will have a disproportionate impact on traveller children. The inclusion of traveller children was intended to reinforce to Members that there are serious EIA issues in the checking budget for this vulnerable group.

**The Committee agreed to ask Cabinet to look again at A and F, and to request further clarity on E.**

Officers clarified they would provide further information on the impact of £10k on EHE, especially in relation to the size of the whole budget and the provision of service.

### **Proposal - Page 98 – Travellers Team EFA.e**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced the proposal (page 98 of the Agenda) and confirmed that this should only be offered as a saving if the schools forum is willing to pick this up.

**The Committee agreed this proposal subject to approval by the Schools Forum.**

### **Page 83 - Social Work Service for Disabled Children**

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes introduced the proposal to create a new structure and thereby achieve savings.

Members discussed that proposal at a previous Overview and Scrutiny to set up working group to review the provision and highlighted the issues with pre-empting the work of the group. It was proposed that as this was a proposal for 2014/15 it was not vital at this point.

The proposal detailed doing the same work but smarter and more economically.

The Director of People Services was sympathetic to Members debate about the working group but highlighted the strengths of budget work and the need to take a 2 year view. Members were encouraged to try and make the 2 year decisions as it would help the council overall and support the work of officers. Members were reminded that not all the variables were known as yet but officers were working with available resources and mindful that savings not accepted would need to be found elsewhere.

The Head of Finance supported the Director of People Services and outlined that proposals made for 2014/15 would makes the savings less harsh often because the savings requirements have lead in periods and will achieve a full year saving in 2014/15. Adjustments can still be made though if required.

Whilst some Members did not support setting up the working group, other Members were mindful that it was possible that the review could find larger savings than already offered.

Members were minded to agree that there will be savings from this budget and the figures may change in future. The best estimate is £200k which may change as a result of the review.

**The committee agreed the proposal subject to the findings of the review. Officers on the working group were requested to feedback to the Committee about the savings, particularly the 2014/15 savings, before implementation.**

### **Page 86 - Removal of professional fees used in start up of the provision of targeted early years and childcare for two years.**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced the proposal and informed Members that the scheme is up and running and the start up costs are not required.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

### **Page 88 – maintaining a vacancy and reducing Early Years Welfare Requirements.**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced the item which involved maintaining a vacancy and recruiting an apprentice. Members were informed that the welfare responsibility is statutory.

Members questioned the term 'Maintaining a vacancy' and officers confirmed that this post will be removed.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

**Page 90, 92, 94, 105 and 107 - these proposals were taken together.**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced these items detailing the reductions in the locality budgets saving proposed around reduction in project work - NEET schemes. This is not a cessation in NEET programmes but it would be a shaving off of the programmes offered and income generation.

Members questioned the reduction in NEET programmes and if there was an implicit cost attached which would add a financial burden. The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes clarified the risks had been reviewed and mitigation had been put in place. Members were informed that there had been a reduction in NEET staff last year, a reorganisation of team working and greater success this year.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

**Page 96 – Re-alignment of budget following a re-structure in LUO**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced this item detailing this is a budget realignment and the service is looking to make reductions and following a zero base budgeting exercise, offer up £50k in 2013/14.

Members received assurance that the savings for 2012/13 had already been offered.

**The Committee agreed the proposal. It was also agreed that NEET provision will feature in our post 16 item on the work plan.**

**Page 101 – cease funding to support to support promoting other forms of travelling to schools.**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced this item detailing that it had historically been a grant which was then included in the base budget to support school travel plans. The service is proposing a reduction to zero as the work is picked up elsewhere in the council. Members were assured that the work is being undertaken by other council departments and there was no impact on the service.

Members of the Committee questioned what proportion the saving was of the whole budget and clarified that the saving should read £8k not £6k.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

### **Page 103 – Re-alignment of budget following a restructure in LUO.**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced this item. Officers confirmed that £50k had been offered as a saving in 2012/13 too.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

### **Page 109 – Removal of contracts and Performance Manager Post**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced the proposal which detailed the removal of a Contracts and Performance Manager post. As this was a result of two functions merged into one there was a need to agree where the saving will be taken from or if it was a 50/50 split.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

### **Page 111 –**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced the item detailing a further reduction in school improvement and skills area, 14-19 and post 16. This would be a discontinuation of a post, doing things in a different way and removal of a vacancy in early years quality improvement. It was a statutory function but members heard this would be carried out by other posts.

Members commented on the detail within the impact of proposal and the reference to 'time being'. Officers clarified the impact and assured members that the team can cope with the work but they would be at capacity and had wanted to flag this up. Officers and members commented on the resilience of the authority but also the vulnerable position.

In response to questions the Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes confirmed she would supply further information to Councillor Coxshall detailing the posts and their FTE.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

### **Page 114 – Efficiency Savings**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes outlined the proposal which involved reducing budgets and further efficiencies achieved through contracts with Lyreco and MFDs. The head of Finance assured Members this was not double counted from the transformation budget.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

### **Page 116 –**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes outlined the proposal informing members that the requirement for feasibility studies will be moved into capital funding and they are not looking to retain anything in budget.



Members were informed that the budget for this year had been used.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

#### **Page 118- Restructure within the Operational and Resources area**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes outlined the proposal which is similar to a review on earlier budgets as a response to the increasing number of schools transferring to academy status.

Members were supportive of the proposal but questioned why it was capped at just £50k. Officers outlined the work undertaken to arrive at this figure and the Head of Finance confirmed that similar work had been undertaken to effect savings with school finance staff.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

#### **Page 120-**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced this proposal which reflected changes in school funding reforms from this April and the removal of the requirement to carry central specialist SEN recruitment tasks, saving £20k from a part time post.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

#### **Page 123 –**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced this item which anticipated a reduction in the number of statutory functions for academies and the ability to generate income by selling services to academies.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

#### **Page 125 – libraries**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced the proposal and informed members that the proposal should detail £100k for 2014/15. Members were informed that in **addition to an** agreed earlier saving for 2013/14 these proposals look at the opening hours in libraries, using the mobile library and the efficiency of using the mobile library in areas where it is not used very much.

Members referenced they were uneasy when figures such as 20% were used which did not detail the extent of the impact. Officers clarified that very detailed information is available and can be circulated if desired to members of the committee. A consultation with library users will be undertaken prior to the saving being implemented.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

**Page 127 – Savings to equipment to support individual pupil access to education not funded by PCT, NHFT or Local Health Board.**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced this item detailing a £20k efficiency saving as a result of reviewing the budget this year and through working with Essex and achieving procurement savings. Members were assured additional requests for equipment would not be rejected. The risks are based on historical need but if actual needs are higher they would look to other budgets where possible to meet demand.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

**Standing Orders were suspended at 9.10pm**

**Page 130 – Savings to the staffing statutory SEN Assessment**

The Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes introduced the proposed reduction in monitoring SEN functions and informed Members they would look to see if schools would generate income to carry on the function.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

**Page 133 – Regulatory Panels**

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes introduced the item detailing a change to regulatory requirements for the adoption and fostering panel. Meetings can be run with fewer people in attendance.

Members questioned the possibility of delays and their causes. Officers informed Members that there are currently no delays but the potential costs are mitigated by using the Adoption Consortium to ensure this.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

**Page 135 – Aiming High for Disabled Children**

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes introduced the item which detailed the provider had gone into liquidation and can no longer be used. This provided the opportunity to reprovide the service and make a saving.

Members questioned replacing the service and were informed that new businesses would have to tender and the service would have to review if that service is required.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

## **Page 138 – Young People Accommodation**

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes introduced the item which was an example of the council providing a budget that had not been fully used for homeless young people.

Members questioned the rationale for setting the original budget and asked if we can be confident there will not be a future peak in demand.

Officers were hesitant to guarantee future demand but outlined that the previous £200k had not been spent each year and savings had been offered. The Head of Finance clarified that the £100k for 2013/14 can also be taken.

**The Committee agreed the proposal with the additional 2013/14 saving.**

## **Page 141 – Emergency Duty Team**

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes outlined the proposal where the social work service out of office hours is historically funded from Children's Services who deal with anyone who needs social work service. This proposal is a virement from Adult Social Care.

**The Committee agreed the proposal.**

## **Page 143 – Munro Principal Social Worker**

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes referred members to previous discussions on creation of this post which had not yet been appointed to. Members were informed it would be possible to make a joint appointment with colleagues from London Borough of Barking and Dagenham although it had not gone to Cabinet as a formal proposal for a shared post. Alternatively this could be recruited as 0.5 post

Members debated the need to look to work with Southend or Essex and questioned that as this was a previous growth item, where is the £80k and asked if it should be a saving in year. The Head of Finance confirmed that this vacant post saving has been taken.

**The Committee agreed the proposal and Officers agreed to rework the wording of the business case**

## **Page 146 – Supervised Contact**

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes outlined the proposal which would look to offer the service in a different way.

Members debated what proportion the saving was as a percentage of the overall budget and the impact this would have. Officers confirmed they would like to review the contract provided in a systematic way and re plan the spending.

**The Committee agreed the proposal but requested that as this was a 2014/15 budget, Officers should report back and revise the saving if necessary.**

### **Page 149 – Allowances for Carers and Special Guardianship Allowances**

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes outlined the proposal which detailed the process for financial payments and allowances which are discussed and agreed in court proceedings however the final decisions are taken within the local authority. There is no guarantee that the courts will agree and there is a risk that this can't be delivered. Research has shown that other colleagues and other Local Authorities may take the same approach. Legal services have been consulted.

Members questioned what contingency was in place if this proposal was not successful. Officers confirmed they would have to look at other budgets to manage cost pressures and potentially could ask for a growth bid if completely unsuccessful.

The Head of Finance reminded Members that this is 2013/14 proposal that is being trialled now. Members will be able to understand the success during the course of the year and the potential savings.

Members discussed the phrase, 'means testing' and officers clarified the instances that this would be used. It was agreed that there is the need to be extremely supportive for guardianship and adoption and the authority does not want to give the wrong impression.

**The Committee agreed the proposal but wanted further information about means testing.**

### **Page 152 – Multi Agency Group Panels**

The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes outlined the proposal which involved redesigning the service and some opportunities to make staff savings amongst the social work input at less senior points.

**The Committee agreed the proposal**

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## **Alternative Budget Proposals**

The Chair invited Councillor J Halden, opposition member, to introduce the proposals. The Member thanked Officers for the assistance in completing the proposals.

**Withdrawal of denominational transport subsidies and replacement of 11-18 school transport with travel passes, with addition of non commercially viable shuttle service.**

The Member referred to proposed savings that had already been agreed. Roger Harris outlined the legal position with regard to transport provision.

Members discussed the issue of minimum distances and the proposal was not supported where it impacted on transport to denominational schools out of borough.

The opposition members highlighted that this can be programmed as savings subject to a review.

The Director of People Services highlighted that there is a need to be careful that this is not double counted but how the money is taken can be open for negotiation and if Committee is minded to put in options to the statutory minimum then that would a cabinet decision.

The Head of Finance explained to the Committee the parameters they were working within, a number of options and that this proposal could put this on work plan to inform the future budget.

The Committee asked that the options paper should address all issues raised and be brought back to Overview and Scrutiny at the earliest opportunity to clarify where the savings can be made from.

**The Committee agreed that this proposal is deferred for further information**

**Performance Related Cost Savings - Communications budget**

The Opposition outlined the proposal which requested that the communications budget should be relocated within the Fostering Service in order to increase the proportion of locally recruited foster carers. This could be done more effectively and flexibly if brought back in house to the Children's Service, away from Central Communications budget.

Members and Officers debated the reasons for centralising the budget and Members asked if the centralisation of the budget gave value for money.

Officers confirmed that it is difficult to recruit foster carers and the Director of People Services confirmed that whilst the Service Directors would like to have control it is not always the most efficient use of resources. The Director confirmed she is 100% supportive of council decision to centralise the function and raised concern that the Committee were being asked to make a decision

that is outside of their remit. Members were informed that the proposal is cost neutral to the council.

Most Members were not convinced that a separate communications budget would increase local recruitment of foster carers.

Councillor Gerrish informed Members that the skill set in media planning sits within the Communications Team and the spend of the budget is closely scrutinised. The budget is best held within Communications.

The Director of People Services outlined that there is a Service Agreement with Communications as to what they deliver and if they don't deliver this needs to be raised internally. Whilst the Committee can have a view the Director would need to be persuaded that centralising has had an impact on recruitment and retention.

Members voted on this proposal. Three members were against the proposal, 3 co-opted members were against the proposal and two were for the proposal.

**The proposal was not agreed.**

**Supporting targeted life chances increase Youth Offending funding and pilot project for improving links between schools and employers.**

The Opposition outlined that this is a growth proposal for the first two years and then it would be income generating.

The Director of People Services welcomed the proposal of investment and detailed that the scheme is expected to trade with academies and asked Members to consider if they should test the water with Academies. Officers confirmed that Academies are likely to be interested in the service.

The chair proposed a 12 month trial and then review to see if it is self supporting within 12 months.

**The proposal was agreed.**

**Establishing Academy Reserves**

The Opposition outlined the proposal which involved £1m to be put into an Academies Improvement Reserve as a replacement for the current School Improvement budget.

Members debated that this should be available to all schools not just academies and were minded not to support the proposal if non academies were excluded. The Director of People Services outlined the very complex arrangements and requested that the committee be clear.

Members were not supportive of the double funding aspect for academies as this model provided two sources of funding for academies and only one for schools.

The Chair proposed that the Administration seek money from reserves for continued school improvement in Thurrock.

**The proposal was agreed but not for academies to be funded. Non academy reserves would be used for School Improvement.**

**Move education department to an 'all academy model' with all possible dedicated schools grant money being directly devolved to the schools**

The opposition member outlined the proposal and highlighted this is expediting what the Government is already doing.

**The Committee voted on the proposal. The proposal was not agreed.**

**Consultation and investigate the cost of child social care**

The opposition member outlined the proposal which requested growth of £5k to investigate and yield savings relating to our care packages, value for money, joint funding arrangements and other areas. Officers outlined that this would be focused on partnership working and welcomed the proposal.

**The proposal was agreed.**

**Zero base budget restructure for the redistribution of discretionary education spend from savings in the structural size of the LEA.**

The Opposition member outlined the proposal and the Head of Learning and Universal Outcome confirmed that a very comprehensive piece of work on zero based budgeting had previously been undertaken and she was confident that there was not large pots of money to be found. It was questionable if this proposal was an efficient use of money.

A vote was taken. Two members were for the proposal, all other against.

**The Proposal was not agreed.**

**Councillor Halden thanked the Committee for the time taken to consider the proposals.**

**Capital Programme**

The Head of Finance outlined the proposals in the Capital Programme. Members discussed the individual bids and the priorities.

The Chair left the room at 10.50pm and the Vice Chair took the Chair.

Members of the Committee reviewed highlighted works to the Connexions building and refurbishing Knightsmead Building as priorities for Cabinet to consider.

**RESOLVED that**

- a) **Committee notes and reviews the additional proposals for budget savings set out in appendices 1 and 3 to the report**
- b) **Committee notes and reviews the capital bids set out in appendix 2 to the report.**

**18 WORK PROGRAMME**

**RESOLVED:**

**The Work programme was not discussed.**

**The meeting finished at 10.59.**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIRMAN**

**DATE**

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact  
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