

MINUTES of the meeting of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 30 October 2013 at 7:00pm

Present: Councillors Charles Curtis (Chair), James Halden, Sue Little, Cathy Kent, Susan Shinnick

Mrs P Wilson – Roman Catholic Church Representative
Mr A McPherson – Parent / Governor Representative

Apologies: Councillor Martin Healy
Reverend D Barlow
Mr S Cray

In attendance: C Littleton – Director of Children's Services
B Foster – Head of Care & Targeted Outcomes
S Green – Strategic Lead, Early Years, Families and Communities
M Peters – Strategic Lead, School Improvement, Learning and Skills
S Young – Senior Democratic Services Officer
K Martin – Senior Democratic Services Officer

The Chair informed those present that the meeting was Audio Recorded

10. MINUTES

Mrs P Wilson stated for the record of the last minutes that she had declared an interest by virtue that she was a member of the Education Commission for the Diocese of Brentwood.

The Minutes of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 2 July 2013, were approved as a correct record.

11. URGENT ITEMS

Councillor Halden (appointed Youth Link at the meeting of the last Committee) summarised the briefing note which was circulated to the Committee via email prior to the meeting. Key points to note were:

- It was proposed to refresh Democracy week to encourage young people to participate and become involved in democracy both locally and nationally.
- To give Youth Cabinet a meaningful role on the Committee
- The Chair and Vice Chair met with Youth Cabinet who had undertaken a focussed piece of work on the children portion of

the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and had made a meaningful contribution – with over 600 responses received. Members were impressed with their work and would like to acknowledge this.

As a result the Vice Chair and Chair made the 2 following recommendations to the Committee and it was:

RESOLVED that

- 1) The Children’s Overview and Scrutiny Committee formally co-opt a Member of Youth Cabinet**
- 2) That the Committee work toward a joint targeted work programme with the Youth Cabinet to set a clear agenda for youth issues, so all sides can correctly engage and feed into that process.**

Further to this it was detailed how Democracy Week and Parliament Week would combine to take place in November (as unfortunately Democracy Week could not take place in October due to the Purdah period). As part of these celebrations it was outlined that:

- A question time event to be held in the Council Chamber with Councillors and Youth Councillors
- A letter had been sent to all schools from the Council encouraging them to set out Democracy week events in schools, for example, a 10 minute speed dating style session.

The Vice Chair recognised how these ideas and plans were developed in partnership with Councillor Diana Hale and would like to acknowledge the positive contribution and the lasting legacy of Cllr Hale’s work.

13. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

Cllr Kent declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue that she has children attending St Thomas Primary School, Hathaway Academy, and Palmer’s Sixth Form College. She is a Parent Governor at Grays Convent School.

Councillor Shinnick declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue that she has friends who attend Belmont Castle Academy.

Councillor Curtis declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue that he has grandchildren attending Bulphan School and is a Governor at Ockendon School.

Mrs P Wilson declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue that she is a member of the Diocese of Brentwood Education Commission.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

14. 2012/13 ANNUAL COMPLAINTS, COMPLIMENTS & ENQUIRIES REPORT

The Director of Children's Services introduced the report and highlighted that it was a general report that had been recommended and agreed at the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The report had been taken to other relevant scrutiny committees in order to give Members an opportunity to scrutinise. Attention was drawn to the fact that there had been a reduction in the volume of complaints over the past two years. The number of complaints was relatively small and it was felt that the service was possibly not as meticulous in recording compliments as much as complaints. This was identified as an area for improvement next year. A learning log was written up following any complaint to ensure that lessons were learnt and to avoid further complaints of the same type in future.

Members commented with regard to how complaints within schools, for example regarding a child being bullied, were managed as this information was not provided on the report. There was concern how schools' complaints procedures were effectively monitored, especially if there was a complaint about the school or head teacher. Officers responded to confirm that schools had their own complaints procedures, which was a formal process through the schools governing body. In response to a request for further information the Director of Children's Services confirmed that she was happy to write to academies and schools to obtain this information for the committee.

Members highlighted that the figure for the amount of complaints partially upheld had significantly increased in 2012/13 compared to the previous year – equating to a 300% increase despite the fact that the number of complaints was down by 10%. Officers responded that complaints were often very complex, for example a complaint may have had 26 parts where only 3 parts were upheld. There was no typical complaint which made it very difficult to generalise. It was clarified that a partially upheld complaint is often evenly balanced and final judgement was ultimately decided by independent investigators.

There was no way to differentiate in the statistics between complaints where the service user had taken offense to a decision/action and those complaints which related to where the Council may have broken the law or policy. As a result Members felt that these statistics did not

provide a clear picture, but it was reiterated that this the report was a summary report and that the service areas did receive an additional breakdown report from which key themes could be identified.

Members requested that they would like to review a copy of the supplementary detailed report that the service areas received so that Members could analyse any trends.

RESOLVED that

- a) The Committee note the statistics for 2012/13.**
- b) The Committee note that the Council will continue to drive forward work to embed learning from complaints as a mechanism to deliver service improvements.**
- c) The Leadership Group to recommend a change in council process with the introduction of an informal stage in the way we process complaints**
- d) The more detailed trend analysis report be circulated to Members for review**
- e) Schools and academies to be contacted to obtain complaint information**

15. ALTERNATIVE DELIVERY MODEL – GRANGEWATERS OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTRE

Officers introduced the report which provided an update and recommendations for Member approval, prior to proceeding to the next more in depth analysis option stage. Once further analysis was complete a report would come back to the Committee before submitting a report to Cabinet with final recommendations.

The alternative models each focussed on 3 key areas:

- To provide more community access and engagement with the local community
- To reduce costs to the Council
- To enhance service provision and increase opportunities for Grangewaters.

Subsequent to the recent visit by Members to the Grangewaters site, Members provided the following feedback and concerns:

- On the day of the visit there was just over 200 children on the site but Members were concerned that none of these young people were from Thurrock. On review of the previous month's bookings with the manager, it appeared that the site was underused by the Thurrock community.

- That Thurrock money was being used to support a locally underused facility that Thurrock people were not receiving full benefit from.
- Poor technology for accounting.
- That the site and staff were not receiving adequate help from the Council 'back office' functions, specifically, in terms of improving their website, which could have been assisted by the centralised website team based at the Civic Offices.
- That Grangewaters was struggling to compete in the market (and without additional funding to develop the centre) would continue to struggle to compete with the nearby Stubbers – which was attracting more bookings from Thurrock schools to its site in Upminster.

Officers agreed that to improve the facilities on offer at Grangewaters and for the site to become more competitive that further funding was needed, which is why a recommendation for an alternative delivery model was made. As a result of the alternative delivery models, Grangewaters could access funding opportunities and capital investment which was currently not accessible to them due to the site being local authority managed.

Officers confirmed that questions around finances had been addressed previously at Overview and Scrutiny Committees and that a recent independent audit report had awarded the centre a 'Green' rating which was very good.

Members were also concerned that fees and charges were being varied at the site. Officers confirmed that Grangewaters fees and charges were set in line with Council Policies and Procedures and where they wished to vary charges (which were sometimes necessary to target disadvantaged or vulnerable sections of the community) then Grangewaters staff applied for permission from the Council.

It was recognised that increased marketing was required to improve local community access to the site. The Troubled Families' team had recently bought provision from Grangewaters, along with the Duke of Edinburgh Gold programme which was also booked to undertake activity soon. Officers felt that although local awareness of the site could be improved, and this was a challenge going forward, there were a lot of young people in Thurrock that had benefitted and further young people who would benefit from the work that had been taking place at Grangewaters.

Members thanked Officers for the report and the Equality Impact Analysis forms for each option; however they also questioned the following information which would help to determine the overall vision for Grangewaters – and therefore the best alternative model to achieve this provision – going forward:

- How many children use the site

- Why children are there e.g. education visit, personal visit
- To determine how many of these children are means tested.

Although information on the numbers of children who use the site was readily available, it would be difficult to determine how bookings were referred to the site and whether the children were means tested, unless the booking was made through the Troubled Families team or the Thurrock Pupil Referral Unit.

Officers and Members agreed that key to this exercise were:

- the ability to determine a clear role and objective for Grangewaters outside of local authority management – and their aim for the next 5 and 10 years
- to increase local publicity and awareness to increase community participation

The efforts of the staff at Grangewaters who had worked hard to turn the site around were noted by all, and Members were informed that at a recent annual inspection the site received excellent recognition for their work. The centre had an excellent reputation for working with challenging young people. .

The Committee recommended that as part of the work on the next stage that more research is undertaken and the purpose of the centre be agreed before recommendations to Cabinet are made.

The Committee agreed the recommendations; however Councillor Halden abstained from point 1.2.

RESOLVED that

- a) Members consider the analysis completed by the working group.**
- b) Members agree to a full analysis of a Charitable Incorporated Organisation prior to recommendations being made to Cabinet.**
- c) Once a full analysis has been completed a further report is made to Children's Overview & Scrutiny prior to proceeding to Cabinet approval.**

16. EARLY OFFER OF HELP STRATEGY UPDATE

Officers introduced the report and presented the visual minutes that were recorded at a recent partnership event, depicting stakeholder views.

Members referred to the case study supplied regarding prostitution in Suffolk, and highlighted the link between early intervention, reduction in

council cost of services and improved societal costs. Members questioned at what stage the success of the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) would be measured – both in cost and societal terms. Officers stated that it was difficult to identify cost benefits of this provision as so many interconnected factors impacted upon service delivery. Officers noted that there were delicate points to consider, as without doubt the implementation of a MASH would create a short term demand as problems would come to the fore that may have otherwise had been missed and going forward could be captured by increased information sharing and service delivery. However once out of this peak savings would be achieved and the Council could already start to identify these benefits by examining case studies from troubled families whereby cases have stopped or continue to escalate because of the efforts of the MASH.

The Committee agreed that they would be interested to see these early results and requested that case studies come back when the Troubled Families Initiative returns on the work programme.

Councillors questioned whether there was a recognisable checklist of warning signs which the council and the public could utilise. Officers confirmed there was a list of warning signs, for example domestic violence, drug abuse, mental illness and that the service worked closely with Basildon Hospital and its partners in identifying these risk factors early on. However the Council could not govern those families who did not wish to work with the service as only when the problem met statutory thresholds can the council legally intervene. Nevertheless much work was being undertaken to ensure these services, such as free day care places for vulnerable 2 year olds, were attractive and accessible as possible.

RESOLVED that

- a) The Committed note the progress of the report**
- b) The case studies of the MASH intervention are brought back with the Troubled Families Initiative report**

17. HEADLINE KEY STAGE RESULTS

The report provided an overall picture of performance in schools in 2013 from early foundation stage, KS1, KS2 and KS4 post 16 years and the need to look at performance at A Level and beyond. The key issues were identified as:

- The decreasing percentage of schools that required special measures
- Improving the quality of teaching that is good or better
- Improving the quality of leadership and management

- Building partnership working among schools – with schools working together to support own improvement and the improvement of others

Members discussed the importance of retaining good teachers in Thurrock and to attract new outstanding teachers to come to live and work in the Borough. Officers noted that schools work hard to attract new teachers to the area and this is being built upon by the strength of the Thurrock's four teaching schools – William Edwards, Treetops, Beacon Hill and Dilkes.

Members highlighted the need to show urgency in KS2– between 2010 and 2013 Thurrock had only closed the national gap by 1% and on this basis Thurrock would only peak the national target by 2017.

Officers identified that where a particular issue had been targeted – such as reading – then progress was accelerated much faster than would have been otherwise. Reading was an area that required particular attention in Thurrock and there was an aspiration to improve reading above age appropriate level. Although maths attainment had fallen recently it was thought by schools that this was not part of a long term trend.

The Committee agreed that to attract good teachers to the area the success of Thurrock needed to be celebrated and the area should be promoted as an attractive place to live, with cheaper living costs and house prices than London.

It was noted that Thurrock aspired for its Looked After Children (LAC) to achieve the same as their peers and that the Virtual School will be instrumental to this in future. The importance to compare Looked After Children's progress in their own relative terms (how much improvement was made by an individual child year to year) was recognised rather than a general comparison to national statistics which had no relation to a particular cohort for that year. The Committee agreed that any additional help and support for Looked After Children would be greatly appreciated.

RESOLVED that

- a) **The Committee noted the provisional outcomes of the summer 2013 tests and examinations and commends pupils, schools and parents/carers on their achievements.**
- b) **The Committee considered how the draft Education Commission recommendations and existing strategies might best be deployed to raise achievement still further across all key stages, especially at Key Stage 2.**

18. FINDINGS OF THE EDUCATION COMMISSION

Officers introduced the report and summarised the six issues and six recommendations of the Education Commission. Officers noted that they wished to establish a Thurrock teaching awards event, which should be encouraged and promoted locally so that submissions of excellent teachers from schools could then be put forward for the national awards.

Members felt that it was important to celebrate the many successes but that it was also essential to hold a frank evaluation of the report, especially in relation to the two report findings below:

- That there was no overarching educational vision and strategy that was owned by all
- That there was a lack of trust between the Council and Headteachers

A Member questioned how many vacant teaching posts were there in Thurrock but at the time of the meeting Officers did not know the exact number.

Members debated at length the important role of school governors and the importance for school governors to receive proper induction training, have a full understanding of their role and feel confident enough to challenge the head teacher and school for effective governance.

Members discussed the importance of diversity issues and questioned whether teaching staff and governors represented the school population. Although this data was not readily available it was felt that the data on teaching staff could be obtained. The importance of avoiding generalisations that certain communities have higher educational aspirations for their children was stressed as each community is in itself diverse.

RESOLVED that

- a) The Committee thanks Officers for the comprehensive report which will support future ambitions for children and young people in Thurrock.**
- b) The contents of the Education Commission are noted and that the report is distributed widely to interested parties including governing bodies for discussion.**
- c) An update is considered at the next committee meeting in November.**
- d) The recommendations of the report are considered and that they form the basis of an initial action plan which is brought back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January.**

19. WORK PROGRAMME

The following items were discussed:

- It was requested that the Budget Analysis and Savings report be deferred to 10 December.
- That the Pupil Place Planning & Child Care Sufficiency should come together as a report on 28 January 2014.
- To delete Pupil Place Planning in early 2014 (as this had been mistakenly included twice on the work programme)
- Report of the next SCIE review was to be included for 28 January.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the draft work programme and the above items are noted**
- b) That Members questions for the December budget report to be sent to Democratic Services so these can be forwarded to Sean Clark for inclusion.**

The meeting finished at 9.20pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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