

MINUTES of the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 5 December 2013 at 7:00pm.

Present: Councillors Bukky Okunade (Chair), Charles Curtis, James Halden, Joy Redsell, Andrew Roast.

J Howell –Foster Carer / One Team

Apologies: Councillor Angie Gaywood
S. Tuttle – CiCC Chair Person
N. Carter – Open Door

In attendance:

B. Foster – Head of Care & Targeted Outcomes
R. Minto – Service Manager (Placement Support)
P. Coke – Service Manager (Children & Families)
S. Young – Senior Democratic Services Officer

The Chair informed those present that the meeting was being recorded and that the recording would be made available on the Council's website.

The Chair welcomed Councillor Andrew Roast, who had been appointed as Vice-Chair of the Corporate Parenting Committee (replacing Councillor Mike Revell) at the meeting of Full Council held on 27 November 2013. Councillor Mike Revell was appointed as a substitute to the Committee.

The Chair also welcomed the representative from the Foster Carers Association / One Team, who was a valued member of the Committee due to her knowledge and firsthand experience of Foster Caring.

15. MINUTES

The minutes of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 5 September 2013 were approved as a correct record.

A Member requested an update on the audit of care packages and the peer view which was discussed at the meeting on 5 September 2013. Officers responded that both pieces of work were ongoing; the audit of care packages had required the examination of the packages of older young people in children's homes and the more expensive placements, once further progress had been made an update report would be provided to the Committee.

In relation to the Peer Review of the Committee officers had hoped to partner with colleagues at Southend Borough Council but due to

staffing changes this had not been possible, however since this time a further volunteer had been identified with a counterpart at Suffolk County Council and it was hoped that this work could be progressed with the Committees approval. The Committee was in agreement that a peer review with Suffolk should be undertaken.

16. URGENT ITEMS

The Chair requested that Officers provided an update on the recent mock Ofsted Inspection. Officers outlined how there had been significant changes to the inspection arrangements for departments which particularly affected Looked After Children. The new model of inspection arrangements had specific subsections on adoptions and permanence of placements and emphasis on care leavers.

Officers had prepared for the new style of inspection by undertaking a mock inspection that was planned by Senior Managers in an authentic manner as possible, staff had only been informed 2 days before which simulated the element of surprise and it was hoped that what the department had learned would engender good results in a real inspection.

Ofsted had recently announced a significant change, in that inspections that had been undertaken in the previous two years had focused on lowest performance departments, however going forward under the new arrangements Ofsted would inspect a cross section of Councils performing at a variety of different levels. As a result, officers anticipated that Thurrock had moved up in the list of Councils to be inspected and so were awaiting the benefit of the written report from the mock inspection. In the interim period before the full report could be provided to Members, officers provided a brief update on the headline statements, these included the following key points:

- Overall the results were positive and the inspectors were pleased with the impressions that were created by Council staff, both permanently employed and agency workers.
- The plans by the Workforce Development team were deemed to be of excellent quality.
- It was felt that Ofsted had raised the bar, and there was a need for Thurrock to go 'above and beyond' to build on the 'good' standard of the last inspection.
- Inspectors looked at selected individual cases and reported that decisions were being made at the right level – decision making was ratified to be strong and sound.

Officers felt that the report would provide a range of constructive suggestions as to how they could improve the service and assured the Committee that they would circulate the final report to Members once it was available. The Committee welcomed this exercise and thought it was beneficial to the service.

17. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

No interests were declared.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

18. REPORT ON PLACEMENT STABILITY FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Officers introduced the report which provided an update on current and recent performance in maintaining placement stability for looked after young people. Officers recognised that they wanted to achieve the best levels of stability possible, and planned to conduct an audit of placement moves in the New Year to ensure that any key patterns or trends were identified.

A Member questioned why children below the age of one often experienced more than one placement, to which officers explained this was a result of a combination of factors, such as being referred to a family centre for assessment and that a positive adoption move counted as a placement move. Further questions were raised in relation to why the stability of placement moves deteriorated on reaching the age of 11 years and whether changing schools was a factor. Members were advised that this was generally due to early adolescence, new challenges and emotional issues as a result of being in care and transferring to secondary school.

Members thanked officers for providing further detail in appendix 1, which helped Members understand and compare placement stability between the different placement types, for example, special guardianship orders and adoption orders. A Member asked whether officers could pinpoint the number of children in residential placements which were 'good' and stable but driven by necessity (for example cases where the child was required to be placed outside of Thurrock) rather than desirability (where a child was in a long term residential placement outside of Thurrock because there was not adequate provision). In response officers confidently assured Members that all those children and young people that were currently placed in a range of residential provision were in the best suited placement for them, for example because of specialist disability needs or who were older adolescents that had been in a variety of foster placements. Officers assured the Committee that it would be very unusual for a child to be placed in residential care without having first been through other foster provision unless they had a specific need.

It was felt by one Member that the financial implications provided in the report could have been more detailed to reflect all the good work that had been undertaken. The good work of the finance team was noted by officers, who appreciated their presence on the weekly placement purchasing panel and that they were producing an ever increasing number of financial reports that were very detailed and fine tuned.

The Committee learnt that there was currently only 1 case where a child subject to a Special Guardianship Order had come back into care but that limited data was available because this was a relatively new legal option and therefore it would have been odd to have a high number of breakdowns at this stage.

Members were advised that statistical neighbours were set by central government, who allocated each authority to a grouping by which they thought they were most comparable.

A Member questioned whether there was scope to build new provision in Thurrock if there were specialist care needs that could not be met by in house provision. Officers stated that there was a national trend among local authorities to move away from running their own children's homes and there was a brief discussion on the reasons and difficulties surrounding this.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the current performance of the authority regarding the Placement stability of looked after young people.

19. ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN STRATEGY

Officers introduced the report which provided information about the Looked After Children Strategy and an update on the key developments that were applicable to looked after children and care leavers. The Committee were advised that the Children in Care Council (CiCC) were keen to play a more active role in developing policies and were currently planning a meet and greet event in the New Year to meet with all Councillors and the Mayor to discuss future engagement. It was noted that an Achievement and Aspiration Strategy was due to be written which would incorporate the Virtual School and Looked After Children. A recent development was that Looked After Children were to remain in foster care up until the age of 21 years.

A Member requested an update from officers on the progress of recruiting and retaining a new Virtual Headteacher. It was confirmed that the interview process was in hand and a large number of

applications had been received for the post, which was being managed by the Head of School Improvement.

The Committee was informed that there had been a refreshed foster care and adoption recruitment campaign, which included having an information stall at the Christmas Pantomime at Thameside Theatre and an advert during the interval, among other strategies that were devised with the assistance of the communications team. Officers noted that it was too early to say how this successful this campaign had been but they were hopeful it would attract new people to enquire.

A Member welcomed further engagement of the Children In Care Council, and outlined a similar process that had recently been undertaken with the Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee whereby a member of Youth Cabinet was to be formally co-opted onto the Committee to allow them a meaningful role in the decision making process. It was felt that the Corporate Parenting Committee could look at making a similar recommendation, to which officers stated that the meet and greet event would be a good opportunity to have an open dialogue with the Children In Care Council as to how they would like to participate going forward.

A brief discussion took place on the importance of Corporate Parenting training for all Elected Members and the best way to capture those Members who had not attended a training session in the past. A number of suggestions were made by Members, which included an information session at Full Council and a refresher training day, however following some debate the Committee were in agreement that it would best to survey those who had not attended and engage in an open dialogue as to their availability and what worked best for them – as some Councillors were in full time employment and training sessions held during the day were not always convenient.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee agree the updated data and any other changes to the Strategy.

20. HOUSING FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS

Officers introduced the report which provided an update on information in respect to Housing provision for Thurrock's Looked After Children and Care Leavers. Key developments to note were:

- Southwark Judgement required the full assessment of 16 and 17 years olds circumstances in just the same way as younger children are assessed and to provide accommodation and support to those who were homeless.
- Housing and Social Care made referrals to Housing for care leavers for permanent accommodation, successful young people

who were evidenced to be able to live independently could then be placed on silver banding to bid for properties.

- A new user friendly pathway plan had been developed with the Children in Care Council (CiCC).

A Member asked for further explanation on the numbers categorised as in 'unsuitable accommodation (custody)', 'non-engagers' and 'living with friends' which prompted a wider discussion on 'suitable' and 'unsuitable' accommodation and concerns that some children and young people could be in precarious situations. Officers clarified that the government had set a number of categories and guidelines as to what was deemed 'suitable' and 'unsuitable' accommodation, and that the latter included bed and breakfast accommodation.

Officers reiterated that it was difficult to engage with some young people and care leavers who could be transient and "sofa surf" between homes of friends or gravitate back to live with extended family. In response a Member questioned whether details of care leavers could be cross checked with Electoral Roll to find out where they were living to ensure their safety. Following this a brief debate took place among the Committee with some Members feeling that this was not an appropriate course of action to take. Officers recognised that they needed to improve engagement with care leavers but emphasised that they also had to respect individual wishes and feelings of care leavers, and that there was a fine balance to achieve between ensuring enough attempts have been made to contact care leavers without imposing on their lives and maintaining and respecting their privacy. This was further supported by the Foster Carer representative, who explained that following a troubled start in life and growing up in the care system a care leaver may wish to distance themselves from the local authority.

It was reported that increasingly more was expected of the local authority in looking after care leavers and officers were particularly keen to examine the best practice of any local authorities deemed 'outstanding' in this area by the new Ofsted inspectors.

The Committee were informed that social workers self reported what accommodation was deemed 'suitable' and 'unsuitable' for care leavers using government guidelines, and that the after care team were often their own worst critics and maintained very high standards – an example was provided where a social worker had declared a care leavers accommodation as 'unsuitable' despite a court order which had allowed them to return to living with their relatives and therefore was beyond the local authorities control. Members recognised that this was a challenging area, but stressed the importance of surveying individuals and working with young care leavers to enable them to make the best decisions for them.

The Committee briefly debated the best ways to monitor housing for looked after children; officers suggested that a housing colleague attend the Committee meeting when the annual report was to be presented, during which the Members requested that housing colleagues could present and clarify the following information:

- The number of young care leavers who were waiting to be housed in need of accommodation.
- The number of young care leavers who had been placed on silver banding and who were actively bidding on properties.
- To examine how long on average it took care leavers:
 - a) To get placed on silver banding.
 - b) The amount of time it took from being placed on the banding to successfully be offered a property.
- To breakdown and explain in more detail, the role of Housing Officers in the care leavers process.
- Whether young people were “sofa surfing” and living with friends because they had difficulty in obtaining accommodation with the Council.
- Whether demand for housing for care leavers was successfully being met.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee:

- 1. Note the contents of the report.**
- 2. Agree that housing for looked after children and care leavers will be monitored by working closely with Housing colleagues and to examine more detailed statistics specifically in relation to young care leavers and their experiences of the housing process.**

21. WORK PROGRAMME

Officers requested that the formal report from the mock Ofsted inspection to come back to the Committee in March for discussion, which was welcomed by the Committee.

Officers asked the Committee if a colleague from Health could attend the March meeting to discuss the Health of Looked After Children item. The Committee agreed and officers confirmed that a health colleague would be invited, although it was not guaranteed that it would be possible they could attend.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee:

- 1. Agree that the mock Ofsted inspection report to be included as an item for March 2014.**
- 2. Agree that a Health colleague to be invited to the Committee meeting in March to discuss the Health of Looked After Children.**
- 3. That the work programme be noted subject to the above amendments.**

22. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Committee was recommended to pass the following recommendation in relation to the following items:-

“That, in accordance with Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act, 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item(s) of business, on the grounds that they could involve the possible disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 1 (information relating to any individual) for exclusion from Chapter 8 of the Constitution of Schedule 12A of that Act”.

RESOLVED:

That the meeting go into exempt session to consider the following report.

23. INFORMATION ON RECENT EXTERNAL PLACEMENTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Officers introduced the report which provided an update on recent external placements for Thurrock’s Looked After Children.

Members asked for clarity as to what the ‘other’ category referred to in the spread of placements detailed in the report. Officers responded that this could mean a child had gone back to live with parents or had been placed for adoption, this was more than likely to have been the case with the younger age groups under the age of 5.

Members briefly discussed the difference between independent fostering versus in house fostering placements, particularly in relation to how many children were being placed through external fostering agencies and the reasons behind this – whether external placements were selected due to case work reasons and therefore that distance was required between the child and Thurrock or because of a lack of local provision within Borough. Officers stressed that it was always most desirable to place a child through the Council’s own in house foster carers as communication is easier and costs are lower but that

there were currently not enough foster carers to meet demand, this resulted in an increasing number of placements being purchased in the independent sector. It was added that in house carers did not always necessarily reside within Thurrock and that similarly foster carer placements purchased from the independent sector did not always fall outside of the Borough boundaries. Officers further described the challenges in securing in house placements, especially for larger sibling groups, and that in order to not split a sibling group up often suitable independent placements were found, despite the fact that there could have been one in house vacancy that would have been suitable for a child within the group. Members agreed that it was important for siblings to be placed together wherever it was possible and in the best interests of the children.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the efforts made by officers to choose appropriate resources for looked after children, including some of Thurrock's more difficult to place children.

The meeting finished at 8:50pm.

Approved as a true and correct record.

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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or alternatively e-mail syoung@thurrock.gov.uk**