

MINUTES of the meeting of Corporate Parenting Committee held on 6 March 2014 at 7:00pm.

Present: Councillors Bukky Okunade (Chair), Sue Gray, James Halden, Andrew Roast, Phil Smith (substitute for Charles Curtis).

Apologies: Councillors Charles Curtis, Angie Gaywood and Joy Redsell.

S. Tuttle – CiCC Chair Person
N. Carter – Open Door

In attendance: W. Caswell – Acting Vice Chair of the One Team / Foster Carer Representative
P. Coke – Service Manager (Children & Families)
B. Foster – Head of Care & Targeted Outcomes
J. Howell – Chair person of the One Team / Foster Carer Representative
R. Minto – Service Manager (Placement Support)
G. Page – Operational School for Looked After Children
D. Peplow – Independent Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children’s Board
T. Perolls – Designated Nurse for Looked After Children, Thurrock Clinical Commission Group (CCG)
K. Pullen – Head of Virtual School
J. Waud – Strategic Lead, YOS, Adolescent Services, Troubled Families (left after item 7)
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.

24. MINUTES

A Member asked for an update on the audit of care packages (agreed in 2013 budget) and the peer review, and was particularly concerned with the time that had elapsed in order for these matters to be progressed.

Officers reported that Peer advice had been sought in relation to an audit of the cost of Looked After Placements, and that regular updates on the cost of placements had been provided to the Committee. Members were informed that the Peer Reviewer had made several suggestions which the team had put into operation, which included:

- Revised administrative arrangements for payments being made;
- Reviewed the older cohort of children;
- Established a Joint Funding Panel with Health, Education and Social Care working together in order to fund placements.

Officers explained that they had unfortunately not had the capacity to draw together a report on this work and the Chair proposed that this should be re-visited in the work plan.

It was further reported that a reviewer had not been successfully obtained for the peer review due to staffing changes at Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, who it had been hoped that Thurrock could partner with. However, a new volunteer had since been identified at Suffolk Council who had agreed to conduct a peer view in principle although this had not happened yet.

Officers apologised for the delay in reporting the Peer Review and audit of care packages. The Member was concerned with the amount of time that had elapsed to undertake these investigations and called for this to be included and prioritised on the work programme.

The minutes of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 5 December 2013 were approved as a correct record, subject to adding Councillor Gray to the list of apologies.

25. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

26. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

No interests were declared.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

The Chair informed the Committee that she would like to change the order of business so that item 7 ' Report on actions arising from the Mock Ofsted Inspection' was taken first and then followed by reports as they appeared on the agenda paper. This was agreed by the Committee.

27. REPORT ON ACTIONS ARISING FROM THE MOCK OFSTED INSPECTION

Officers introduced the report which provided an update on the findings from the recent mock inspection. It was reported that at the last Ofsted

inspection in 2012 a 'good' rating had been achieved, however there is now a new framework for future inspections which emphasises the voice of the child and how this was heard and incorporated into the plans so it must realistically be expected to feature more prominently in future.

A Member asked for clarification on how a clear distinction between political, strategic and operational roles can be demonstrated. Officers stated that actions as to how the authority manages and provides for the looked after children are underpinned by a strategic direction and that the political part is emphasised strongly in Ofsted inspections. It was reported that there is an expectation that Members are aware of the experiences of children and young people and that their voices are heard, and that officer views are not solely relied upon.

The Chair informed the Committee that she had been interviewed during the mock inspection and that one of the questions that had been asked was how members were informed about the experiences of looked after children.

Members were informed that the Chair and Vice-Chair intended to shadow a social worker on two separate visits to child or young person in care. It was felt that by taking a true sample, they would be able to see firsthand what was being done to help Thurrock's looked after children. Following which observations could be shared with the Committee. Officers confirmed that these two visits with social workers would be scheduled.

The foster carer and one team representative explained to Members that the voices of children were heard in many ways, which included through social workers, the Children in Care Council, Oaktree, House Visits and the ePEP (Personal Education Plan) among others. She was confident that children in care knew how they could express their views and complaints and that they had greater opportunities for their voice to be heard, not just through social workers.

The Independent Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) informed the Committee that the meeting of 17 March would be themed on the "voice of the child" and that a number of partners were due to attend, which included the Police, Educational Partners and the Chair of the Corporate Parenting Committee.

An officer felt that in answer to the Members original question, the distinction in roles was also assisted by the targeted work and selective reporting back to the committee which demonstrated leadership and accountability.

The Head of Care & Targeted Outcomes explained how Ofsted inspectors examined documents in the public domain in order to

identify a golden thread and that the reports submitted to Members were important in order to identify different trends.

Members welcomed the reporting mechanism, but it was questioned whether this meant that there was information that the Committee were not examining in terms of the mock inspection which could be considered more accurately.

In response officers explained that the mock inspection did not attempt to predict an Ofsted grading as a mock inspection only engaged with two mock Ofsted inspectors for one week, whereas the actual mock inspection would likely take place over a one month period with 14 inspectors.

Officers stated that it was desirable to undertake another mock inspection should the real inspection not take place within one year in order to refresh learning, which was welcomed by the Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the contents of the report.

28. ADOPTION REPORT OUTLINING PROCESS AND PERFORMANCE

Officers introduced the report which provided an update on the Adoption service fulfilling obligations under the National Minimum Standards.

It was explained that the Adoption Scorecard report did not make good reading, but that this related to cases of children who were in the care system 4-5 years ago. Therefore it was observed that the published figures did not reflect current or more recent performance which was significantly better than what the scorecard report indicated.

A Member questioned whether Thurrock initiated more or less care orders through the court than its consortium partners in Havering and Southend, to which it was confirmed that Thurrock was around the middle of its statistical neighbours in terms of total numbers of children being looked after. It was reported that it was best practice to initiate court orders as this underpinned a child's plan and increased security and stability.

It was further reported that there had been a shift in more care orders being initiated through the court; especially for younger children and that this gave them better chance of being adopted. As a result it was expected that many of the Borough's looked after children would have subjected to a care order.

Members questioned why Essex was not part of the consortium, to which the committee were informed that the arrangements had been

agreed several years ago and that Thurrock is well served to partner with smaller local authorities such as Havering and Southend.

A Member asked for assurances that the selection process for potential adopters was not being negatively affected by targets, and that it was more desirable for a child to be placed in the right home for them rather than being placed in a situation which could break down.

Officers agreed that the best interests of the child were of utmost importance although targets could not be ignored. Officers were confident that the process of finding a suitable home for looked after children was working well and assured Members that shortcuts were not being taken.

The Committee were informed that children were meticulously matched to prospective adopters and that the recruitment process for adopters was both thorough and honest.

A Member drew particular attention to the report which explained that a temporary member of staff had been recruited because the workload had been unmanageable, and questioned what would happen to the department once the temporary post came to an end.

Officers explained that the post in question was to provide full time support to a colleague, who was also new to their post of Adoption Panel Administrator, and it was hoped that funding could be sought to allow this support to be continued.

A Member asked what fees were associated with the Ofsted inspection and whether there were any direct contributions made to cover the cost of inspectors. Officers believed that a direct contribution was not made but confirmed that this would be clarified outside of the meeting. It was reported that there were fees to pay Ofsted on behalf of the fostering and adoption service and these were estimated to be approximately £1500.

Addendum:

Following the meeting it was confirmed that the correct figures were £1,161.75 for Local Authority Adoption Services and £1,815.75 for Local Authority Fostering Services.

A Member cited a publicised case where the council's proposals had been changed by the courts and questioned whether this was an issue that over local authorities faced. It was confirmed by officers that it was not unusual for the court to reach a different decision than that which the local authority had proposed.

There was a brief discussion on the ideal number of adopters Thurrock needed to meet demand, during which the committee were informed

that the consortium arrangements required Thurrock to recruit 10 adopters every year and that further adopters in addition to this number could be utilised by the consortium or other local authorities for a national fee. Members were advised that Thurrock placed between 8-12 children per year with adopters.

The Committee confirmed that they were satisfied with the report as a reporting tool but that they would like to see the following details included in future reports:

- An 'at a glance' table included within the report in order to summarise the narrative and performance indicators.
- Further comparative data in order to compare Thurrock with the consortium partners, statistical neighbours and local neighbours.

The Committee were advised that a National Adoption Scorecard database existed online that would enable Members to make an informed comparison between Thurrock and the performance of other local authorities around the Country. Officers agreed to circulate the link to the database following the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee:

- 1. Note the contents of the report.**
- 2. Note their satisfaction with the report as a monitoring mechanism, subject to an 'at a glance' table and comparative data with consortium, statistical and local neighbours being included in future.**
- 3. Note their satisfaction with the above criteria on management, outcomes and conditions of registration.**

29. EDUCATION RESULTS OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

The Head of the Virtual School introduced the report which outlined the educational outcomes of Looked After Children.

Members welcomed the report and recognised that due the problem of the small numbers of the cohort the figures could be skewed significantly on the performance of one child. With this in mind it was questioned why out of borough schooling appeared to consistently indicate a higher pass rate.

The Head of the Virtual School stated that she had illustrated this point because in previous years data had not been collected that distinguished between children educated in Borough and out of Borough. It was reported that a high level of looked after children with

special education needs were also educated in Borough and this could also explain the figures. It was hoped that for the forthcoming year these figures could be obtained and interrogated to examine if there was a distinction.

Members welcomed the introduction of the ePEP (Personal Education Plan) and were surprised that this information had not existed in an online format before. It was explained to Members that the data was collected on a personal level before, but that as ePEP was now a well established system it was thought that this would improve reporting.

A Member asked whether the authority provided one-to-one tuition support to looked after children to help them in their education. The Head of the Virtual School stated that schools should assist looked after children with any additional tuition that may be required, however there was also a Personal Education Allowance that could be drawn upon.

The foster carer representatives felt that schools differed significantly in their attitudes and the support that they offered to looked after children. It was felt some schools were not performing as well as they could in spending the money that they were allocated and that improvements could be made in the level of support and tuition. It was further noted that the schools should be more transparent in how the money is spent and that a breakdown should be provided.

The Head of the Virtual School confirmed that schools should evidence how they spend the Pupil Place Premium on their website, but that this was also data that the virtual school were keen to obtain and challenge in order to increase accountability.

Members questioned whether this feedback was obtained regularly from foster carers, to which officers confirmed that they did receive such feedback through social workers and that they were keen to hear about these issues so that they could be addressed.

A Member asked whether it was worthwhile for the Committee to receive a further report on schools in order to distinguish which children were doing well and not so well and the schools they attended so that a comparison could be made. Officers stated that it was not as easily identifiable as some schools offered excellent support but had lower performance and vice versa. It was noted that the best way to manage progress was to evaluate performance against age related expectations.

The Head of the Virtual School explained that she was happy to provide a follow up report in six months time to update Members on progress. It was felt that a report in September and an update in March would be valuable to the Committee, as GCSE data was not calculated until September.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the educational outcomes for LAC in Key Stage 2 and 4 in 2012/13 and the measures in place for 2014/15 to further support the education of LAC.

30. HEALTH OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

Officers introduced the report which provided an update to Members on the performance of health checks for looked after children. It was felt that the authority was perhaps not as good as it could be at accurately recording and representing the data. It was believed that the team were under recording those aspects that had been completed, for example that Health and Social Care maintained two different electronic systems that recorded immunisations but these did not talk to each other.

Members were informed that the authority recorded the percentage of under two year olds who had dental checks on record, however most dentists would not see a child until after they were two. This had the effect of skewing the developmental checks data. As a result officers planned to undertake a data cleansing exercise to ensure that figures accurately represented reality.

Members asked whether the authority was clear on the health problems looked after children faced in Thurrock. In response it was reported that looked after children tended to be under-immunised or missed out on health promotions, however all had a health plan to identify what action was required. It was felt that the data contained within the health plans could be audited to provide a more accurate picture.

Officers explained that obesity was a problem generally for Thurrock children, but this did not seem to be an issue for children becoming looked after and if anything some children tended to be undernourished on the point of entry into the care system.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the contents of the report, and support officers in rectifying some of the problems identified.

31. WORK PROGRAMME

Officers explained that the meeting dates for the new municipal year had not been released yet but invited officers to discuss any items that they would like included on the work programme for 2014/15.

Following an open discussion, it was agreed that the following items would be included on the work programme:

- An update on the audit of the care packages and the outcomes of the Peer Review.
- Health of Looked After Children (to be scheduled around March 2015).
- Education Results of Looked After Children (September) and a further update in March.
- Further information on the ePEP and outcomes.
- A report on Care Leavers and their progress, to be incorporated into the annual Looked After Children Strategy.
- A report from the Children in Care Council and the voice of the child.
- Housing for Looked After Children
- A report on 'Achieving Permanence.'

The Head of Care & Targeted Outcomes stated that she would refer to the categories used in the Ofsted inspection process to see if there would be any suitable topics that could be of interest to the Committee and reported back on.

32. 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.

33. 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.

The Committee were informed that it was hoped that the balance of in house and external provision of foster carers could be readdressed, as it was desirable to have a greater percentage of in house foster carers.

Members questioned whether the balance had altered because of the increased numbers of children entering the Thurrock care system, or whether the ability to attract foster carers had decreased.

Officers stated that the numbers of children entering the care system had increased but that there had also been an increase in the numbers of foster carers in Thurrock. It was reported that increased numbers had been placed outside of the Borough because it was preferred that sibling groups were kept together.

Officers explained the importance of the Southwark judgement which set out the local authority's duty to provide accommodation to looked after children who were homeless.

A discussion took place on the importance of taking a balanced approach to foster care for young people aged 17 years and over, and the opportunity for young people to stay in foster placements until age 21 following the recent change in legislation.

The Committee felt the report served its purpose but it was requested that case studies be included in future exempt meetings.

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 9:15pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Stephanie Young, telephone (01375) 652831,
or alternatively e-mail syoung@thurrock.gov.uk**