

## **Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 5 September 2018 at 7.00 pm**

---

- Present:** Councillors Joycelyn Redsell (Chair), Graham Hamilton (Vice-Chair), Barry Johnson and Steve Liddiard, Lynn Worrall (Substitute for Qaisar Abbas)
- Apologies:** Councillors Sue MacPherson, Qaisar Abbas, Luke Spillman,  
Co-optees Gregg Brown and Sharon Smith
- In attendance:** Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director Children's Care and Targeted Outcomes  
Brian Relph, Interim Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance  
Keeley Pullen, Head of Virtual School  
Kallum Davies, Democratic Services Officer
- 

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting may be filmed and was being recorded, with the audio recording to be made available on the Council's website.

### **9. Minutes**

The Minutes of the 6 June 2018 meeting were approved as a true and correct record.

### **10. Items of Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

### **11. Declaration of Interests**

Counsellor Worrall made a non-pecuniary declaration of interest stating that a report by the Prince's Trust which was referred to on page 20 of the Agenda had been written by her, in her capacity as an employee of the Trust.

Councillor Liddiard made a non-pecuniary declaration of interest stating that he was a Foster Carer employed by Thurrock Council.

### **12. Children's Social Care Performance**

Before commencing the first item of business the Vice-Chair, Councillor Hamilton, expressed his dissatisfaction with the quality of the reports presented to the committee. The Councillor stated that the information presented was confusing to a layperson and that the graphs could not be easily interpreted as they had been printed in black and white.

Councillor Hamilton further stated that the report alternated between the terms “Looked After Children” and “Children Looked After” as did the associated acronyms (CLA / LAC).

The Vice Chair went on to state that the use of statistical neighbours was confusing and that many of them were Councils situated far from Thurrock’s borders.

Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director of Children’s Services stated that she agreed the reports need to be printed in colour, but pointed out that the full colour versions were available on the website. The Officer then explained that the Department for Education allocated each Local Authority a set of statistical neighbours based on similarities in population and demographics for the purposes of benchmarking. This was not something that could be changed by Thurrock.

The Chair, Councillor Redsell asked Officers to present the report for the first item of business.

The Assistant Director introduced the report stating that there had continued to be a high demand on statutory services however there had been a reduction in contacts and referrals which meant Thurrock was coming into line with its statistical neighbours.

The Assistant Director explained there had been continued focus on child adoption however the local courts were not keen on issuing adoption orders. She did however state that they had already doubled the previous year’s number of adoptions.

The Chair invited questions from Members. Councillor Worrall, referring to page 21 of the report, stated that she had previously been Portfolio Holder for Housing and had worked on increasing the number of Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMO’s) in the borough, and questioned if there was now a shortage of such properties.

The Assistant Director stated that there was a serious shortage of HMO’s as there was only 1 which could accommodate 4 to 6 young people. The Officer went on to state that they had presented a business case to investigate opportunities to increase the number of HMO’s, which had been approved prior to the meeting. This meant that they were now able to begin exploring options in this regard.

Councillor Liddiard asked what assessments the report referred to. The Officer explained that it referred to primary assessments done after receiving a referral from the Multi Agency Support Hub (MASH). She further clarified that the MASH take all the information and decide on the most appropriate course of action for each contact. The report referred to the contacts received by the Social Care Assessment Team from the MASH.

Councillor Hamilton asked what the general age of children up for adoption was. The Assistant Director stated that the majority were under 5 years old, however some were part of a sibling group where one of the siblings might be up to 7 years old, and these would not be separated.

The Chair stated that she had become aware of a problem in her Ward where there had been a HMO for young people in which they had been left unsupervised. The Chair expressed concern that there was no regulation for private sector HMO's.

Councillor Johnson stated that new licensing rules were being brought in to tackle this problem and that HMO owners would be required to register. The Chair was pleased to hear this but still felt concern that children could be lost to the Local Authority without adequate supervision in such accommodation.

Councillor Johnson explained that the definition of a HMO was being reduced to 2 storey buildings, down from three, and 2 or more unrelated occupants, down from 4.

The Chair asked Officers for a report on private sector HMOs in Thurrock as she was concerned unscrupulous landlords could be getting away with not looking after young people placed in their properties.

Councillor Hamilton asked who was paying the rent for these young people if they are unsupervised. The Assistant Director explained that the Local Authority paid to place its Children Looked After in these properties, where there was an expectation of appropriate care; and this was checked before the landlord was engaged. However as there was no requirement for HMO owners to be registered with the Care Quality Commission (CQC) it was difficult to ensure ongoing appropriateness and the system relied heavily on the young people feeding back about conditions.

Councillor Worrall stated that the Council is currently engaged in developing its Local Plan, a plan which was to set out provision for the future of the borough however she had noted there was no reference to HMO's in the Local Plan Draft. The Councillor suggested the Planning, Transport and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee be contacted and asked to look into adequate provision for young care leavers.

Joseph Kaley, representative of Children in Care Council stated that they had previously considered a team of young inspectors comprised of Children Looked After to voluntarily conduct random inspections, and that this idea should be revisited. He also noted that although they would have no real authority, and landlords would be able to refuse inspection, that this would be in itself an indication of the quality of the care.

The Chair stated that they would need to be accompanied by an officer as it would otherwise be unsafe, but expressed her support for the idea. The Assistant Director agreed and stated that Rory Patterson, Corporate Director for Children's Services had also been interested in the idea.

Councillor Worrall stated that the reality was that the lack of suitable places for 16+ had been down to Councillors and that all Councillors needed to take responsibility.

Jackie Howell stated that provision simply was not being made, and that this had not been a new issue. She elaborated that this issue had been consistent over a number of years and still very little had changed. Ms Howell stated that Joseph Kaley had still been waiting to be told where he would be living after returning from university, but the fact was that the Local Authority itself had not known.

Councillor Redsell stated that this applied to all university leavers. Ms Howell stated that the difference had been that Joseph Kaley faced street homelessness because, as a child in care, he had no family home to return to.

Councillor Liddiard stated that many Children Looked After had personal and mental health issues which exacerbated the problem of finding them suitable placements. Councillor Liddiard felt the cost of building new HMO's would be less than the cost of dealing with such cases reactively.

Councillor Johnson stated that HMO's were very difficult to build and often turned into hotels. The Councillor asked how many placements there had been in the Local Authorities 1 HMO. The Assistant Director stated that it was always at capacity.

The Chair stated that not all Children Looked After came back to Thurrock after university, which made it difficult to quantify the number of placements required.

Councillor Liddiard stated that the Council owned 55 office buildings, some of which would be suitable for conversion into an HMO. He further stated that it was incumbent on all Members, as Corporate Parents, to keep an eye out for opportunities to support these provisions.

The Chair stated that there had been a number of new Councillors in recent months and that the responsibilities of Corporate Parents should be presented to all Members again.

The Chair moved the debate onto page 17 of the report highlighting that Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) were accounting for twice the cost of "in house" foster carers; i.e. those whom had been employed directly by the Council. The Officer stated that more funding was needed to advertise and recruit more in house foster carers and save on IFA's.

Ms Howell stated that each foster carer was paid £130 per week, and although carers were permitted to work, this was impractical as their placements often required a significant time commitment, and £130 was not a living wage.

The Chair agreed and stated that she had also not seen much advertising for foster carers. She went on to state that Members should be doing more in this respect, as there were 49 Elected Councillors each of whom was jointly responsible for the Children Looked After in Thurrock.

The Chair asked Officers about the numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers (UAAS). The Officers stated that there continued to be a steady influx however they were distributed across neighbouring authorities based on capacity. The Officer further stated that the figure was deceiving because it did not account for the cost and time commitments of processing UAAS, only the few which remained in Thurrock. The Chair asked Officers to prepare a report on the through-flow of UAAS.

The Chair thanked Officers and asked if all members were in agreement with the recommendations of the report.

## **RESOLVED**

**Members noted the areas of improvement in Children's Social Care and work undertaken to manage demand for statutory social care services.**

### **13. Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report**

The Interim Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, Brian Relph introduced the report and highlighted the key issues which had been identified. The Officer stated the number of Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) had remained steady however there had been some areas for improvement – especially in relation to child participation, IRO consistency and Pathway Planning. He also pointed out that the feedback from Children had been positive with many citing their IRO as the only consistent person in their life. It was also noted that Education had the fewest number of issues identified.

The Chair stated she had been pleased by the consistent presence of the IRO. Councillor Liddiard asked who would see the IRO report and if it was per child. The Officer explained that there was a separate report produced per child but that the Annual Report provided an overview of the service as a whole.

Councillor Worrall stated that she had been disappointed to learn some reviews were only being completed in the weeks before the next review was due. The Officer stated he too had been disappointed to discover this and emphasised that he had taken a robust approach to address this issue.

Councillor Worrall asked if a report on this could be brought to the Committee more regularly. The Assistant Director stated it could be added to the recurring Social Care Performance report.

Joseph Kaley stated that he had experienced this situation first hand. He also suggested a more graded termination of the IRO's contact with Children

Looked After, as it was at the time an abrupt ending to what was often their most consistent relationship. The Chair agreed this would be a better approach for children entering aftercare.

The Officer stated that he supported this idea however it would need to be reviewed carefully in order to balance resources between their statutory duties and a graded withdrawal. The Chair asked the Officer to report back to the Committee on this.

Ms Howell stated that the school year continued past the 18<sup>th</sup> birthday of a young person and perhaps Children Looked After services could follow the school year. The Head of Virtual School stated that the Virtual School's support did not end at the 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, and the service continued to provide support, although they did not receive funding for this.

Councillor Johnson noted from the report that Thurrock had roughly 2 boys to every 1 girl in care and questioned if this phenomenon was unique to Thurrock. The Assistant Director for Children's Services stated that Thurrock was slightly disproportionate to other Councils however explained that this was largely due to the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers entering Thurrock, who were usually male.

Councillor Johnson also spoke of the IRO Feedback Form, which he had felt was condescending to young people because it had asked them to tick "smiley face" boxes. The Officer stated that the form had not been updated in some time and was now being considered as part of a wider review, and one of the goals was to make it more inclusive of older children. The Officer stated that the review would also investigate alternatives such as Apps and digital approaches.

Councillor Worrall stated that the Prince's Trust conducted their surveys by text at no cost to the recipient, and that a prize draw was added as an incentive.

The Chair agreed however felt that there was no substitute for a face to face conversation, as these were often more informative and also taught young people essential communication and interpersonal skills.

The Chair thanked Officers for the report.

## **RESOLVED**

**The committee noted the Annual IRO Report for 2017-2018 and the recommendations within it.**

### **14. Work Programme**

Members agreed to remove "Placement Update of Care Packages" from the Work Programme as this had been integrated into the standard item "Children's Social Care Performance Report".

The Chair suggested that the Children in Care Council address Full Council again in the near future for the benefit of new Councillors and to remind all of their responsibility and liability as Corporate Parents.

**The meeting finished at 20.25**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIR**

**DATE**

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact  
Democratic Services at [Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk](mailto:Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk)**