Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 7 July 2020 at 7.00 pm

Present:	Councillors Bukky Okunade (Chair), Jennifer Smith (Vice-Chair), Abbie Akinbohun, Alex Anderson, Sara Muldowney and Elizabeth Rigby Lynda Pritchard, Church of England Representative Nicola Cranch, Parent Governor Representative Sally Khawaja, Parent Governor Representative
In attendance:	Councillor Halden, Portfolio Holder for Children's and Adult's Social Care, Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services Ian Wake, Director of Public Health Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills Joseph Tynan, Interim Assistant Director of Children's Services Temi Fawehinmi, Contract and Performance Manager Sarah Williams, Service Manager, Education Support Service Roberta Fontaine, Youth Worker Lucia Lucioni, Youth Cabinet Member Alicia Jones, Youth Cabinet Representative Adam Shea, Youth Cabinet Member Wendy Le, 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. The Chair also gave the following welcome message:

"I would like to say a special welcoming message to everyone, both in the chamber and those who have joined us remotely. I trust you and your families have kept safe during this pandemic, I can imagine the caring and shielding responsibilities which some of us have had during the heights of the Covid-19 crisis. I would like to thank our officers and carers for safeguarding our children, and teachers who have worked to provide education to vulnerable and key workers' children.

This is our first meeting of the municipal year, please bear with me as I get used to chairing a "socially-distanced" meeting."

1. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 February 2020 were approved as a true and correct record.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

Lynda Pritchard declared that she worked for Thurrock SEND services.

4. Portfolio Holder Update (Verbal)

Councillor Halden gave the following update:

- During lockdown, over 90% of Looked After Children (LAC) reviews had been completed on time. As lockdown restrictions ease, a plan would be drafted to continue to improve services for children. The service continued to work on issues such as foster care pay which had received a funding boost of £350,000. Head Start Housing continued to expand and enabled the service to continue to support care leavers.

- Regarding vulnerability, Thurrock was considered a safe borough as stated in past inspections from Ofsted and CQC but the service could not be complacent with this and the PFH had requested an independent review of Thurrock's Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership to ensure that it effective and delivering Serious Case Reviews within timeframes. Once the review of this was published, the PFH would discuss with the Chair of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee the findings before implementing any recommendations. The service was working to ensure that youth offending services were better incorporated into other council services to protect young people from grooming from gangs and also to ensure there were opportunities for young people. This would be on the Agenda for the PFH's Economic Vulnerability Task Force in which Councillor Holloway was a part of and the PFH invited Councillor Okunade to be part of this task force as well.

- Regarding mobility, a new strategy would be implemented that would help the transition into adolescence for young people and would begin with a refresh of the health and wellbeing strategy with a deep dive on mental health. The importance of young people's voices to be heard by the NHS was highlighted and to work with partners in fostering and adoption services to consider the service's performance such as 58% of pathway plans being completed which was not what the service aspired to and needed improvement in. The service aimed to help young people reach the ambitions they wished to achieve and not just be a formal processing system for LAC.

The Chair questioned how the effectiveness of the Development Board would be measured. Councillor Halden explained that in discussions with partners, the targets would be considered but success would currently be judged on the work of the Economic Vulnerability Task Force which would be focussing on protecting young people and their interests and livelihoods.

Councillor Akinbohun questioned what strategies were in place to help young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Councillor Halden highlighted his concerns for young people during the pandemic which were employment, housing and safety. A core duty of the Economic Vulnerability Task Force was to provide advice to young people and reach out to them for feedback from services such as Inspire and Head Start Housing. It was important to ensure that the advice given to young people was valuable and what could be done to change the advice where needed to ensure young people were able to benefit from the advice given. The apprenticeship levy would also be looked with a Postcode Apprenticeship Plan. He went on to say that a report from the Economic Vulnerability Task Force could be brought to Committee after the summer.

Councillor Muldowney felt that young people would be disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and questioned whether there were funds to support the work within the PFH's remit. Councillor Halden confirmed that the service had received some funding already where 600 laptops had been delivered for LAC and the service was helping young people whose homes were not Wi-Fi enabled. There was other funding that was currently focussed on managing infection rates through monitoring accounts and possible rises of infection rates. However, funding for young people and LAC was always protected and services would to be offered through partnerships. He went on to explain schemes such as Head Start Housing helped to save the Council from placing young people in out of borough placements and enabled the Council to effectively support young people. There was some funding from central government and the Council had a robust system.

5. Youth Cabinet Update (Verbal)

The Youth Cabinet gave the following update:

- The previous Youth Worker, Patrick Kielty, had left and was now replaced by Roberta Fontaine.
- Elections had taken place before lockdown and the results were that Lucia Lucioni was now Chair and Adam Shea was Vice-Chair. Alicia Jones was also a member of Youth Parliament.
- Meetings were taking place over Google Meets where guest speakers had attended to discuss youth employment. There had also been discussions on involving more SEND children in the Youth Cabinet.
- Youth Parliament was looking into a piece of work that would enable young people to submit questions to government press briefings. This ignored the voices of young people which was important to be heard as the future generation.

The Chair congratulated the Youth Cabinet on their newly elected positions and agreed that young people's voices should not go unheard at local and national level. The Committee would support the Youth Cabinet in their work to ensure they were heard. Regarding Youth Cabinet meetings, the Committee discussed joining these meetings which the Youth Cabinet welcomed. A discussion was held on the Youth Cabinet meeting the PFH to

discuss their concerns and questions. Councillor Halden confirmed that a virtual meeting invite would be set up for the Youth Cabinet to meet with himself.

6. Safeguarding Children During COVID-19

Presented by Joe Tynan, the report informed the Committee of the significant changes made to working practices within Thurrock Children's Social Care, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures that have been taken to ensure children continue to be supported and safeguarded. The report can be found on pages 15 – 20 of the Agenda.

The Chair questioned whether there had been challenges on safeguarding children during COVID-19 particularly where vulnerable children were not able to attend school. Joe Tynan explained that social workers had been creative when seeing children during lockdown and had delivered food parcels to families with vulnerable and had been speaking with children through windows. Through discussions with families being support supported by the Council, the service was able to make decisions according to concerns raised such as COVID-19 contamination. The statutory duty was for the service to contact families being supported under Child in Need every 20 days but during lockdown, this had been increased to every fortnight and where the children had not been seen or heard, the service would make unannounced visits. There had been challenges but the service had seen more engagement and communication from some children and teenagers through technology methods. The service was currently looking into a recovery plan with local authorities in the eastern region where ideas would be shared. In the event of a local lockdown, the service was prepared and was liaising with partner agencies, monitoring referrals in the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and communications had been sent out to ensure people were aware of the routes of referral and support for young people. As schools would be returning in September, a strategy was in place if there was an influx and to manage a potential increase in domestic abuse or mental health issues.

The Committee discussed how the MASH was currently operating during lockdown which was still operating in the same way as before but with a limited capacity in the office and staff working at home were still able to work in the same way as they would in the office. The MASH had also seen a number of referrals reduced. Members queried whether there had been an increase in domestic abuse during lockdown which there had not been but the service was tracking these on a weekly basis.

The Committee sought clarification of the risk assessment system for children and Joe Tynan explained that the risk assessment looked at each child's individual needs and the risks associated with these. Children on a child protection plan were identified as an imminent risk as they had already met the threshold for a child protection plan so they would be assessed as a 'red' case that needed face-to-face contact particularly where there were particular concerns such as neglect or family dysfunction. For certain level of concerns, there would be more frequent contact with families and independent cases

were looked at by the Quality Assurance Team and reviewed and signed off by team managers and senior managers.

The Committee questioned if children, that were not suspected to be lower risk, were being monitored as children had not been in school and could be influenced to have different views or opinions. Joe Tynan explained that schools had been in regular contact with children and where there were concerns, the service had been liaising with schools. Children that were perceived to be lower risk were offered virtual contact, if any concerns were raised a direct would be undertaken to explore the issue with the child and their family. The service worked with parents to provide advice and support in a creative way.

RESOLVED:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members were informed about the support and protection provided to all children and young people open to, or referred to, Children's Social Care or Early Help Services within the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic.

7. Education during COVID-19 Update (Verbal)

Michele Lucas gave the following update:

- Schools had been working tirelessly during lockdown.
- Senior Managers had met with CEOs and other infrastructure chairs on a weekly basis with a focus on supporting children from early years up to post 16. Through a close working partnership with the Public Health Team, the service had the support to resolve issues quickly in schools if there were any identified.
- Schools were contacting pupils on a regular basis and schools had been able to feedback to the social care services. Where children had returned to school, schools had been creative in solutions that adhered to social distancing guidelines and had quickly adapted to ensure pupils were receiving their education in the best way possible.
- Schools would be working over the summer to ensure they would be ready for the return of pupils in September under social distancing guidelines.
- For Early Years, the Council had been able to provide nursery provisions where private nursery providers had to remove their provision.

The Committee raised questions on whether there were extra finances available for schools and if the schools' budgets had been affected. The Committee also mentioned that the current school years had been defined as the 'Corona Class of 2020' and questioned if there were plans in place to prevent an attainment gap. Michele Lucas said that schools were costing COVID-19 related costs into a COVID-19 related cost centre and central government had also been providing funding to support different areas and over the summer, the voucher scheme would be available to ensure free

school meals were provided to vulnerable children. The Olive Academy would also be receiving an additional £750 for their year 11 pupils to help with transition into college and there were online offers for their most vulnerable children. Regarding concerns of an attainment gap, schools had adapted to providing online learning offers and the key areas of focus were on year 11 to 12 and hoped that the lessons learned from these areas of focus could be incorporated into the wider cohort of young people and children. An update could be brought back to Committee in the Autumn which the Chair agreed and also asked that a briefing note be provided to assure the Committee of the plans in place.

The Committee sought more details on the transition for children who were moving into new schools in the new school year. The Committee also asked what provisions were in place for education to support year 11s to enable them to attain the grades they needed and the types of financial support available for certain costs such as travel. Michele Lucas answered that most schools were giving online tours of the facilities to give year 6 children transferring into year 7 an idea of what the school would look like. Regarding attainment grades for year 11s, some schools were looking into opportunities for year 11s to resit and the service was working with local colleges to see what the next steps would be for year 11s who did not achieve the grade they thought they would achieve and whether they could retake those exams if they wanted to. Regarding financial support, cases would have to be considered on an individual basis and the service remained committed to ensuring that young people were able to access the educational opportunities available to them.

The Committee discussed the online learning offer from schools in that some schools had received these along with homework but had no feedback form teachers. However, schools would welcome any discussions with parents. The online learning varied across schools where private was offered full online lessons which the Committee questioned whether this would be rolled out across Thurrock particularly where new laptops had recently been acquired for LAC. Michele Lucas clarified that the laptops had been assigned to the service's most vulnerable children only and that most of the Borough's schools' online learning was presented through Google Meets and other platforms and that schools were working hard to provide lessons online. The Committee also discussed education support for post-16 in that officers would meet with the Youth Cabinet to get their views and feedback on education for post-16s.

8. Update on Thurrock Children's Services Continuous Development Plan

Presented by Joe Tynan, the report gave an update on the position of the development plan which was heard at the last Committee meeting. The report can be found on pages 21 – 50 of the Agenda.

The Committee thought the plan needed to show more data to highlight certain points. The Committee queried whether 3.3 on page 32 had been implemented; how close the service was to resolving 4.2 on page 40; and the

Chair asked what the levels of co-operation were in return home interviews regarding child sexual and criminal exploitation. Joe Tynan confirmed that point 3.3 on page 32 had been implemented and that there had been a number of practice changes and progress since the Ofsted recommendations. Regarding point 4.2 on page 40, there had virtual meetings held with the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Partnership and that the plan was continuously updated and reviewed on a monthly basis and assurance was given that point 4.2 had been resolved. Joe Tynan went on to say that the service would be undertaking a deep dive study on missing children in August which would include views given in return home interviews; what actions were taken upon those views; and the trends and analysis of missing children would be looked at. There had been some improvement in return home interviews and that more data could be included in the next update to the development plan.

RESOLVED:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members were conversant with the updated *Thurrock Children's Services Continuous Development Plan,* following the Ofsted Inspection in November 2019, which will be used to monitor and measure further development of the service.

9. Annual Report of the Director of Public Health, 2019/20: Serious Youth Violence and Vulnerability

The report was presented by Ian Wake which can be found on pages 51 – 170 of the Agenda. A presentation was presented to the Committee which outlined the issue of violence and vulnerability in young people.

Councillor Anderson noted that urban areas were usually built up with gang members particularly with Thurrock being so close to London and questioned if Thurrock was working closely with London Local Authorities to tackle gang issues. He also noted that analysis on the variation of youth violence was by ward and questioned if this was an entire ward as there were some areas within a ward where there was a lot of anti-social behaviour compared to the rest of the ward. Ian Wake explained that young people moved around in different Boroughs which Boroughs were aware of. Thurrock's Youth Offending Team had links with Essex Police and other Boroughs and the challenge was that London Boroughs could not identify all young people that were already involved in gang related activities in Thurrock. Thurrock continued to work with London Boroughs this issue. Regarding Councillor Anderson's second question on data, Ian Wake explained that data did not give a full picture and that a range of agencies needed to be brought together to discuss 'at risk young people' and the steps to take to alleviate concerns that would give a more detailed picture of the situation. For young people at high risk, the service would ensure a statutory response to be given and for those at a lower risk, it would be a more strength based response such as providing a package of support to help young people achieve their goals.

The Committee questioned what measures were in place to lower the risk of young people joining gangs or to eliminate the risks where young were not in

education which increased the likelihood of gang membership. The Committee also noted that crime rate had fallen during lockdown and asked if the impact of COVID-19 on gang membership would present any other challenges. Ian Wake answered that the Youth Offending Service provided a range of programmes to help prevent young people from joining gangs as once a young person became gang involved, it would be hard to get them to exit. He went on to that a young person that was not in education did not necessarily increase the likelihood of gang membership. But the service was working to get schools reopened to provide young people with the education structure needed. Regarding crime rate, Ian Wake said that national data showed that crime rates had fallen due to lockdown restrictions and that a number of services had been scaled back or delivered in a different way.

(At 9.16pm, the Committee agreed to suspend standing orders until the end of the Agenda.)

The Chair felt the report was detailed and helped to provide an understanding into an insight into the issue of gang violence. She requested that a report be brought back to the Committee to highlight the actions taken on the recommendations within the Annual Report in Appendix 1. Officers agreed to this.

RESOLVED:

1.1 That Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted and commented on the content and recommendations contained within the report.

1.2 The Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered how the findings and recommendations contained within the report can best be implemented and used to influence broader council strategy in this area.

10. Thurrock Council Home to School Travel and Transport Policy - Update

Presented by Temi Fawehinmi, the report outlined the areas of the Education Transport Policy 2016 that had been reviewed, the reasons for these and the proposed changes. The report can be found on pages 171 – 182 of the Agenda.

The Committee discussed the emotional impacts on children who had to move schools and how it affected their academic progress despite the financial advantages given within their report. The Committee highlighted their concerns of the recommendations and were not minded to support these. For recommendation 1.1, Councillor Muldowney felt children were already at a disadvantage and moving to different schools too many times would impact on their final attainment grades at GCSE with those moving. For recommendation 1.2, Councillor Muldowney was not in favour of pupils paying for transport as the Council's financial situation was considered healthy as highlighted in previous Full Council meetings. For recommendation 1.3,

Councillor Muldowney sought clarification on whether a child would be expected to move back to a school within their locality should a place become available.

Michele Lucas answered that there were exceptional circumstances in some cases in the recommendations. Referring to recommendation 1.2, Michele Lucas explained that post 16s would be learning to travel which was a skill that would enable them to progress into adulthood. But where there would always be exceptions for some young people, the service would ensure that transport would be available. Regarding recommendation 1.1, Michele Lucas said that there were challenges to moving children to different schools and each case was looked at closely before any decision was made in line with local policies. Referring to recommendation 1.3, Michele Lucas said that the service was required to follow legislation and place children in a school if there was no suitable school place within the maximum walking distance but with the number of new schools due to open in Thurrock, the service was aware that children were better placed within their local community.

The Chair noted the detailed summary of the legal implications in the report on pages 175 – 177 of the Agenda and referring to the findings from the consultation, she also could not agree with the recommendations. With recommendation 1.1, she questioned whether it was an optional requirement to transfer a child to another school and if parents refused, whether there would be a charge for not doing so. Referring to recommendation 1.2, the Chair raised concerns on charging SEND post-16s SEND travel fees as the Council's vision was to enable vocational and academic education, skills and job opportunities for all and SEND post-16s would miss out on these opportunities if they could not afford to attend due to travel costs.

Temi Fawehinmi explained that a policy was in place for families of low income and for exceptional circumstances so the Education Transport Policy 2016 was not a blanket policy. With mainstream post-16s, where travel funding was decommissioned, young people could still apply and would be given transport if there was a need and this would also apply to SEND post-16s. There were young people that had the capabilities to travel independently and the service reviewed the level of need along with a range of factors of a young person and provided support where needed and also identified what would be looked at before a charge was considered or not. The Chair did not feel this explanation was reflected clearly in recommendation 1.2 and was not minded to agree to this. Temi Fawehinmi answered that the recommendation could be amended to reflect that the charge would not be a blanket provision across all SEND post-16s. Councillor Muldowney felt that if there was to be a reduction travel provisions, the service should not be starting with their most vulnerable group of children. She also did not support recommendation 1.2.

Referring to recommendation 1.3, the Chair felt the recommendation was not clear and questioned how this differed to recommendation 1.1. She raised concerns over moving children around different schools. Temi Fawehinmi explained that there were two different aspects and the first was in terms of

mileage. Where parents chose a school that was not a child's nearest school, this would be covered by the Education Act which gave specific mileage depending on the child's age. The second aspect referred to unplaced children who were not able to secure a place in their local schools so the service would transport them further afield. The service was aware of the issues arising from this but Thurrock was in a very unique position where it had attracted a lot of investment in developments and housing which meant the numbers of children that were moving into the Borough had difficulty finding a place in a local school. Due to the numbers of children, there would be children who may be unplaced for a while and using the travel provisions to go to school. The service looked at a range of factors and aimed to find the right balance for a child that would benefit the child without moving a child to another school midterm.

Councillor Muldowney did not feel that removing paid transport services for parents in certain situations was the solution to the problems as outlined in Temi Fawehinmi's explanation. She went on to say that an additional burden would be placed on parents who was not able to pay for the transport charges. Councillor Smith and the Chair queried whether a child would be expected to transfer to a local school if a space became available particularly if a child was settled in the school that they were currently in and if the child chose to stay in the same school would the Council continue to fund the transport fees.

Temi Fawehinmi explained that there were questions around how long the Council would be able to sustain funding the transport fees. There was also the issue of stability for a child and how likely it was for a child to continue to attend a school that was outside of their local community. It was a matter of balancing a child's needs and the abilities to sustain those transport costs for a long period of time.

There were differing opinions from Committee Members on recommendation 1.3 and the Chair and Councillor Muldowney did not agree with the recommendation.

UNRESOLVED:

That O&S recommend to Cabinet the proposed policy refresh to the 2016 policy. That O&S recommend that Cabinet agrees and adopts the proposed refresh of the policy with specific reference to the three areas listed below:

1.1 That families in Temporary Accommodation for more than three months be asked to transfer their children to a school with a place that is nearest to the home in which the family has been placed.

1.2 The implementation of a charging regime in respect of for transport to Post 16 facilities for pupils aged 16-25 with SEND. Pupils will be required to pay the full cost or make a contribution

towards the cost of transport. This service is discretionary and the Council may charge for the delivery of such transport.

1.3 That transport be delivered, in accordance with legislation, only when there is no suitable school with a place available within the maximum walking distance from the child's home (two miles for pupils under the age of 8 and 3 miles for pupils over the age of 8)

11. SEND Inspection Outcome - Written Statement of Action Update

Presented by Michele Lucas and Kate Kozlova-Boran, the report provided an update to the SEND inspection outcome from last year which can be found on pages 183 – 190 of the Agenda.

Councillor Muldowney felt the format of the report was not clear and did not accurately highlight the areas of concern brought up in previous updates nor the progress on these and there had been no information on whether COVID-19 had affected any progress. She thought the format provided to Committee back in October last year was a better format. Therefore, she could not support recommendation 1.1. Michele Lucas explained that a verbal update was to be provided at each meeting, as a standing item, to highlight the progress of the action plan and the action plan as shown back in October 2019's meeting would be brought back at the next meeting in October 2020. She went on to say that the Improvement Board, which was chaired by the PFH for Education, also reviewed and scrutinised the progress of the action plan. The Chair asked that the format of the report should give information at a glance along with performance indicators to measure progress of the action plan.

RESOLVED:

1.1 O&S to consider the evidence within the report to give a view on whether they believe we are working to address the WSOA work programme.

1.2 O&S to consider how they can support the ongoing work around SEND young people in light of the global health pandemic.

12. Update on the Free School Programme

Presented by Sarah Williams, the report provided an update on the status of the free school programme including temporary accommodation prior to the opening of the free schools where required. The report can be found on pages 191 – 195 of the Agenda.

The Vice-Chair questioned if there would be a use for the old building once the new building was implemented. Sarah Williams answered that the old building would become a training centre for use by the school and the local rugby club and would have a long-term benefit for the community.

RESOLVED:

1.1 That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the update in relation to the Thames Park Academy Free School, Orsett Heath Academy Free School, Treetops 2 and Reach2 Free School

1.2 That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the update on the plans for temporary accommodation at Orsett Heath Academy and Thames Park prior to the opening of the Free Schools

13. Work Programme

The Chair apologised for the length of the meeting and suggested that additional meetings be scheduled in future to avoid an overcrowded agenda.

The Children's Social Care Performance report was added to the next meeting of 6 October 2020.

The Committee was informed that the Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business Manager, Alan Cotgrove, had left his post.

The SEND Written Statement of Actions was added as a standing item to every meeting.

The meeting finished at 10.27 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk