

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 17 November 2022 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Adam Carter (Chair), George Coxshall (Vice-Chair), Alex Anderson, Paul Arnold, Martin Kerin and Srikanth Panjala

Sarah Barlow, Church of England Representative
Nicola Cranch, Parent Governor Representative

Apologies:

In attendance:

Priscilla Bruce-Annan, Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business Manager
Jenny Coles - Independent Chairperson & Scrutineer Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills
Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help
Clare Moore - Strategic Lead YOS and Prevention Youth Cabinet Representative
Thomas Flynn, Youth Worker Children's Services
Rhiannon Whiteley, Senior 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.

1. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting 13 September 2022 held on 5 October 2022 were approved as a correct record save that it was agreed that the presence of the Parent Governor Representative and Church of England Representative should be recorded in the minutes.

The Chair requested an update on fostering recruitment. The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help responded that she didn't have the information with her to update the Committee but she would obtain it and update the Chair after the meeting.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

4. Youth Cabinet Update

The Youth Cabinet Representative updated the Committee that at their October meeting the Head of Thurrock's Music Service attended and requested assistance with promotion of Thurrock's Music Service. The Youth Cabinet members proposed that a youth music survey should be completed and this is currently being put together.

The Youth Cabinet Representative further updated the Committee that the Local Plans Manager also attended their recent meeting to obtain their feedback on what it is like for young people living in the Borough to help inform the local plan. She also confirmed that the Youth Cabinet is looking for further young people to join.

Councillor Panjala queried how many members there were in the Youth Cabinet.

The Youth Cabinet Representative confirmed that recently they recruited another 4 members, but she was not sure what the total number of members were.

Councillor Kerin suggested that the Youth Cabinet Representative could attend a Full Council Meeting.

5. Thurrock Childcare Sufficiency Annual Assessment 2022

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills presented the report to members. She summarised that the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment is a statutory duty and is a document that allows them to see where there are gaps in sufficiency and also enables providers to see if there is an opportunity for them to plug that gap. The Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed that by the end of the summer term 2022, 76% of eligible two year olds were attending early education and childcare. This is the highest this number has been since 2015 and higher than the national average. This is very positive as it can make a real difference around school readiness.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills also raised that since the decision was made to close two nurseries in Tilbury, they have not been approached by any parent who has said they cannot access a place and she confirmed that there are some spaces in that area. The Assistant Director for Education and Skills stated that they are always keen to increase childminders and also to encourage more early years providers into the area. Finding premises is a challenge and they are working with their colleagues in the Planning department regarding this. If there are going to be new housing developments they need to look at the early years provision in the area. There

will be a new school coming in Aveley in 2023 which will have some early years provision there.

Councillor Coxshall queried whether the term “special schools” was still appropriate.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed that it is the correct terminology used nationally. It was previously schools for children with disabilities. However, she accepted over time things change.

The Chair echoed Councillor Coxshall’s concerns and stated that he was also uncomfortable with the terminology.

Councillor Kerin queried what work was being completed with schools on recruitment and retention

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed that when looking at recruitment of childminders they do lots of informal events around what it means to be a childminder. What do you have to do to become a childminder. Recruitment and retention in early years is a real challenge. We look at ways to help our providers to recruit, they also help with access to sites, expertise and helping providers become Ofsted ready.

Councillor Kerin requested an update in future reports on recruitment. He noted there was a large deficit in Grays Riverside where there is the highest proportion of children under 4.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills stated that when providers contact them they will look to identify premises to support them. They also look at how they can get more childminders to come forward and in addition to this they are working with schools to look at them taking children on at 2. Councillor Kerin commented that he liked the way the report was presented and the ward breakdown but he would also like to see the stats by geographical area.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills agreed to this.

The Chair echoed Councillor Kerin’s comments and noted that nobody goes to secondary school in his area as he doesn’t have one in his ward.

The Chair confirmed he found the recruitment and retention concerns troubling and stated that he would like to see regular updates on this at future committee meetings.

Councillor Coxshall commented that he had found in his day job childminders in Southend had hit a lot of bureaucracy.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills agreed some of it is quite challenging to navigate and stated that they do work hard with childminders to help them navigate the process and to become Ofsted ready and when providers are looking to expand they will work with their colleagues in Planning and support them where they can.

Councillor Coxshall raised the issue of education pathways and highlighted that when he was at college students were often put on the childcare course when they failed their GCSE’s and queried whether other students were being encouraged that there is a career in this sector.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills agreed this was a great question. She confirmed they do offer apprenticeship routes. It is a career opportunity and it can lead to early years teaching. You can earn and learn on the job and what you learn in the classroom and on the job is different.

RESOLVED

1.1 That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee review the Annual Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2022 and offer any additional comment or feedback.

6. Children's Social Care Performance - Quarter 2 2022-23

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that the report provided a summary of Children's Social Care's performance for quarter 2 which covers July – September this year. She updated the Committee that the number of multi-agency safeguarding hub contacts and referrals are comparable to the same period the previous year. There has been an improvement in the number of assessments completed in timescales from 90% to 94%. At the end of September the number of children on Child Protection Plans was 83 compared to 106 last year.

In terms of Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children up until a few months ago our allocation number was 31 this has now been increased alongside all other Local Authorities to a UASC quota of 45. The Borough currently has 35 UASC children but this week we are on the rota for accepting UASC children and therefore this number is likely to increase.

Between July and September 2022, there were a total of 218 missing episodes represented by 28 individual children. Only 4 of the 28 children were under 16.

All children are offered a Return Home Interview within 72 hours following each missing event, with the aim of understanding the young person's circumstances and the reasons why they go missing. As at end of September 2022, the percentage of children offered a return to home interview was 100% of which 72% accepted and received an interview compared to 56% in September 2021. This represents 16% increase in interviews being accepted and received.

The Chair applauded the department for the improvements. He queried how the department had been able to improve the number of those taking up the offer of a return home interview.

The Assistant Director of Social Care and Early Help confirmed they meet every Monday morning to look at this issue. They are using social workers and looking at anyone who has a relationship with the child to conduct the

return home interview so the children are more willing to tell us where they have been and why.

Councillor Kerin noted there was an 11 % drop in referrals and queried if this was in fact good or bad news.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that when they get contacts they look at whether a referral is needed. Contacts and referrals often go down in the summer holidays and rise once the children return to school in September. The number of referrals stepping into social care are going down but the numbers of those going into early intervention are going up so hopefully they are dealing with issues at a much earlier stage. If they receive repeat referrals starting to rise it can mean the threshold isn't quite right. Repeat referrals are currently low and this helps to measure that they are getting it right.

Councillor Kerin raised the issue of missing episodes and queried why these happen.

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help responded that the majority are 16 years old and over and quite a lot are 17 and 18 in a matter of weeks. If a child is not where we expect them to be then they are reported as missing. They may be staying with a girlfriend or boyfriend or a friend. It therefore might not mean they are unsafe but they are not where they should be.

RESOLVED

1.1 That Members review the areas of improvement in Children's Social Care and work undertaken to date to manage demand for statutory social care services.

7. Family Hubs, Start For Life

The Strategic Lead for YOS and Prevention presented the report to the Committee. She updated the Committee that Thurrock Council is one of 75 local authority areas eligible to benefit from the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme. Funding of £301.75 million has been allocated to the programme between 2022–2025 alongside an additional £28.7m to improve the home learning environment (HLE) for 3–4-year-olds as part of the pandemic education recovery programme. Funding is dependent upon local authority areas meeting all programme requirements over three years.

Support for children aged 0-19 years, young adults up to 25 who have special educational needs and/or disability (SEND), and services to support parents/carers will be delivered through a family hub network. These services will be designed to enhance and expand a range of existing children's centre and early help provision. Local authority areas must involve parents and carers in the development and design of local services (co-production) and look at opportunities to co-locate services including those delivered by the voluntary sector and community groups.

The programme has a focus on the Start for Life period from conception to age two, incorporating recommendations from *'The Best Start for Life: A Vision for the 1,001 Critical Days'* review (2021). In response to this, funding has been specifically allocated to develop or enhance perinatal mental health and parent-infant relationships services, and infant feeding and parenting support. Local authority areas are also required to deliver a range of multi-agency core services through their family hub network.

Up to fifteen local authority areas will be appointed as Trailblazers and receive additional funding in Year 1 to 'go further and faster'. Trailblazers will be national leaders, support other local authorities, and develop best practice. The Strategic Lead for YOS and Prevention confirmed that Thurrock Council submitted its 'sign-up' form and Trailblazer application to the central programme office on the 30 September for consideration.

Each local authority area is required to submit a Delivery Plan by the end of 2022. This will sit alongside locally owned plans and set out the overall ambition for change over the 3 years of the programme and show how funding will be used to achieve funding objectives. The Delivery Plan will set out medium to long terms goals including 'go further' options, milestones for opening family hubs and financial modelling.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Lead for YOS and Prevention for the report and commented that he hoped Thurrock would be selected as a trailblazer.

Councillor Kerin asked if the delivery plan will be ready by 31 December 2022 as this is only 6 weeks away.

The Strategic Lead for YOS and Prevention confirmed it isn't ready yet but they have started it and it will be ready by the deadline.

Councillor Kerin queried if any of the locations of the family hubs could be confirmed.

The Strategic Lead for YOS and Prevention responded that she was unable to confirm the exact locations as yet.

Councillor Anderson noted that it stated in the report they would be looking at main facilities in East, West and Central areas of Thurrock. As a ward Councillor in East Thurrock he welcomed any improvement to services in the area.

RESOLVED

1.1 That Members receive this report for information and note the requirements and responsibilities of local authority areas engaged in the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme.

8. Fees & Charges Pricing Strategy 2023/24

The Assistant Director for Education and skills presented the report. She confirmed that there had been some quite large increases last year as they completed a benchmarking exercise. She confirmed that they haven't taken

the route of raising charges in line with inflation this year. In relation to Grangewaters they have looked at what other outdoor centres are charging. She commented that music services have stayed much the same.

Councillor Kerin raised concerns that groups will be outpriced of using Grangewaters.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed that many of the charges have stayed the same. There has been a 17% increase for the hiring charge of one of the units for the day which is often hired by external partners. She agreed that they don't want to stop people being able to use the facility and reassured the Committee that they had completed market testing work.

Councillor Arnold sought reassurance that this is not about making money but cost recovery.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed that Grangewaters is a full cost recovery model.

RESOLVED

- 1.1 That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the revised fees and charges including those no longer applicable; and comments on the proposals currently being considered within the remit of this committee.**
- 1.2 That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee note that Director delegated authority will be sought via Cabinet to allow Fees & Charges to be varied within a financial year in response to legal and regulatory requirements.**

9. Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Partnership

The Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Partnership (TLSCP) business manager presented the report to the Committee.

The TLSCP business manager updated the committee that Dr Prakash Srivastava, creator of the Neglect Graded Care Profile 2 assessment tool, will lead the LSCP Annual conference this year titled 'Working Together to Identify and Tackle Neglect in Thurrock'. The conference will take place on 6th December 2022. Workshops on the day will cover multi-agency collaboration, criminal neglect, vulnerabilities and impact on education and health. The aim is for more practitioners to be aware of neglect, the importance of identification, how to assess and what support is available for families to reduce the incidence. The new Thurrock Neglect Tool Kit for practitioners will be launched at the conference. They had intended to deliver the conference face-to-face but have now taken the decision to deliver it virtually due to rising covid numbers and to ensure more people can attend.

The Pathway to Service and Threshold Intervention document that sets out the pathway and threshold criteria for making referrals to services regarding concerns about a child, has been reviewed and refreshed by a multi-agency Task and Finish group. The document is now completed and once ratified by the governance process the document will be published and shared throughout the multi-agency partnership.

Next week over three days on 22nd, 23rd and 24th November, the LSCP will see over 4,000 children in Years 5 and 6, from across the borough travel to the Civic Hall in Blackshots, to experience the annual Walk Online Roadshow. This event sits under the priority of Violence and Vulnerability and raises the awareness of the positives as well as the risks posed to children online. The roadshow will cover interactive presentations from an Online Awareness Programme, Thurrock Gangs and Exploitation Manager, Essex Police and the LSCP Business Team. All children attending will be given a goodie bag containing useful resources around the online theme. A virtual parents and carers specific event will follow the roadshow on 1st December 2022. Due to the restrictions during 2020 and 2021, it was not possible to deliver the roadshow. In March 2023, an additional event will be delivered for children in Years 7 and 8, who would have attended during that period.

A new termly Safeguarding newsletter was launched in October to provide updates and information on safeguarding topics to all working with children and young people. The autumn edition includes a range of areas including a welcome from the Independent Chair and Scrutineer, LSCP Priorities 2022-2024, emerging concerns, legislation and updates and campaigns. The newsletter can be accessed via the LSCP website.

On Tuesday the TLSCP business manager along with other staff from the LSCP, Thurrock Safeguarding Adults Board and Children and Adult Social Care attended an Inter faith Networking event. The aim of the event was to bring all Thurrock faith communities and council services together to network and share information. Referral routes were shared and information was provided on what to do if they are worried about a child. The learning from Shae and Ashley LHR lists ten recommendations that are further divided into sub-sections totalling 14 actionable areas. Work has started on all actions, 6 actions are complete and the remaining 8 are on track to be completed within timescales.

Councillor Kerin queried if neglect cases had increased.

The TLSCP business manager confirmed that she understands from information they receive from agencies that the numbers are quite steady. However, neglect was a priority before Covid and they hadn't been able to do as much work on it as they liked as they couldn't see children.

Councillor Kerin queried how closely the TLSCP staff team work with local schools.

The TLSCP business manager confirmed that their Governance groups have education representatives on all them. When identifying task and finish groups they also ensure that there are education representatives included on them. They meet with the designated safeguarding leads quarterly and share lots of information on what they are doing. On a day-to-day basis Headteachers or DSL's can contact them to discuss any concerns they have. The TLSCP delivers training on safeguarding and managing allegations.

The Parent Governor Representative highlighted that she has previously attended the Walk Online programme and it is outstanding and she would recommend that anyone present at the Committee should attend.

The TLSCP Business Manager agreed and confirmed that things will have even moved on from a few years ago as there are always new emerging concerns and platforms coming up all the time.

The Chair requested that the Walk Online Roadshow details are circulated to Members.

RESOLVED

- 1.1 **That the Committee note the update on the work of the LSCP and the progress made on Action Plans to date.**

10. Work Programme

The Committee discussed the work programme.

The Chair requested an update on recruitment and retention in the early years sector. The Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed a report could be provided to the March Committee Meeting and an appendix will also be provided to cover the information requested by Councillor Kerin.

Councillor Kerin requested a further update on the Family Hubs / Start to life.

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed an update could be provided in January on this.

The meeting finished at 8.53 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**