

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 14 March 2023 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:

Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills
Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help
Priscilla Bruce-Annan, Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business Manager
Rhiannon Whiteley, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Youth Cabinet Representative
Youth Worker
Andrea Winstone, Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND
Sarah Williams, Service Manager, Education Support Service

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.

20. Minutes

The minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 17 January 2023 were approved as a correct record.

21. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

22. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

23. Youth Cabinet Update Report

The Youth Cabinet Representative presented the report to the Committee.

The Chair thanked the Youth Cabinet Representative for attending the meeting tonight and the other meetings in the last year. The Chair commented

that the Committee really value the updates provided. He queried if there had been any developments on the recruitment of more members to the Youth Cabinet.

The Youth Worker responded that there are 2 or 3 new members trickling in but they still would like more representatives from schools and that is something that will be on her agenda going forward.

Councillor Kerin highlighted that the Youth Cabinet update was something he looked forward to hearing at the Committee meetings. He queried how the Nextdoor Nature Programme was going. The Youth Cabinet Representative responded that it was going really well.

Councillor G Coxshall commented that it was previously hard to find information on the Youth Cabinet, he commented that it was great this will now be available on the website.

The Assistant Director of Education and Skills highlighted that it would be a great opportunity if the Chair and Vice-Chair of Youth Cabinet could meet with the Chair and Vice Chair of this Overview and Scrutiny Committee to gain some learning about how they got to the position they are in.

The Chair agreed this was a good idea and commented that he would open it up to all members of the Committee.

Councillor Arnold enquired as to whether the Youth Cabinet members had any input into the design of the Thurrock Youth Cabinet Online Consultation Portal.

The Youth Worker confirmed that she did liaise with members regarding the look of the page. Members did put forward ideas and had an input in the text that goes up.

Councillor Panjala queried which 5 locations are being considered for the Nextdoor Nature programme.

The Youth Worker responded that there is one in South Ockendon, two in Grays, one in Corringham and one in Blackshots.

The Chair thanked the Youth Cabinet Representative for their update.

24. Annual Report of the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Councillor Johnson thanked the Youth Cabinet Representative for her contributions to the Committee meetings.

Councillor Johnson outlined that the portfolio has two distinct parts Education and Skills and Children's Social Care and Early Help. He confirmed that the Local Authority is still very involved with the Academy Schools. He stated that

he was thankful for the fortnightly meetings with the Chief Executives of the Academy Schools. He confirmed that as Orsett cannot take 120 pupils this year work is being done to find alternative places in other schools. He also highlighted that the Home to School Transport was a challenging part of the portfolio and officers were working hard to reduce this spend. He urged members to become acquainted with the policy to help residents with any queries they may have on this. Councillor Johnson stated that it was vital vulnerable persons receive the same level of care and reminded the committee that all 49 members are Corporate Parents.

Councillor G Coxshall queried whether the Aveley School building was still on track.

Councillor Johnson responded that as far as he was aware September remained the expected opening date. He was aware the builders had fallen into disarray but he has not been told anything else.

Councillor Kerin noted that the Thurrock Adult Community College building had gone, he queried if it was still offering the same services.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills responded that the Adult Community College were quick off the mark with the pandemic to develop online platforms and that has speeded that up. They are looking for a permanent home. Adult Education has changed over time, funding is around ensuring residents have the right skill set to enter employment as opposed to previously there been a focus on leisure. She confirmed they are looking at a teaching space and their aim is to start the new academic year in the new premises and an update on this will be provided at a future meeting.

Councillor Kerin noted that at the bottom of page 26 it referred to the option to reduce the amount of demand for EHCP's, he requested reassurance that EHCP's will be issued on account of need.

Councillor Johnson responded that it was necessary to check whether an EHCP is really necessary.

The Assistant Director of Education and Skills states that many Local Authorities had seen a large increase in requests for EHCP's. This was expected as a result of the pandemic. It is right that a review takes place and a panel will review the decisions made. The Assistant Director of Education and Skills confirmed that most children are supported in school and get access to additional support and they are making sure schools manage the finance around this. The Assistant Director of Education and Skills reassured the Committee that any child that needs a plan will get a plan. Councillor Kerin queried how many children were set to lose Home to School transport as a result of cuts.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills clarified that they had a statutory duty to offer Home to School transport. There is a clear process and

criteria, if parents apply and meet the criteria then the Local Authority has a duty to provide it. There is a very clear process for appeals too.

Councillor Anderson requested an update on Headstart Housing.

The Assistant Director of Education and Skills confirmed that this had been realigned with the Housing directorate and will therefore come under the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee now.

Councillor Anderson queried what work was being done to ensure we can absorb the additional pressure from the increase in Unaccompanied Children Asylum Seekers (UCAS).

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help responded that they have spoken to foster carers to give them a better understanding of this. Most unaccompanied children asylum seekers are over 16 and therefore are offered supported accommodation as opposed to foster care. It depends on their age and needs to make sure they get the support they need to integrate in society. This Friday they are doing a presentation to Ofsted regarding this. They also provide bags with clothing, toiletries so the children feel safe and comfortable. The amount of missing episodes have reduced in Thurrock and therefore this Authority is not following the trend nationally with large amounts of missing episodes.

Councillor Panjala queried whether there is a lack of secondary schools in the area as there are 39 primary schools and just 13 secondary schools.

The Assistant Director of Education and Skills clarified that the secondary schools take a lot more pupils and that is why there is a substantial difference in the amount of secondary schools in the borough. She reassured the committee that there is enough capacity and this is something they look at on an almost daily basis as a lot of people are moving to Thurrock.

Councillor Kerin noted that savings of 4 million pounds are required over a period of 3 years, he queried what planning is being put in place to minimise the impact of this.

The Assistant Director of Education and Skills stated that they had already made some of these savings and she confirmed that they will always have to work within their statutory duties. The S114 is in place and decisions will be difficult.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that they are trying to move services around and look at what can be done differently. Savings have been identified and are not necessarily about cutting services but about targeting services in the right area.

Councillor Kerin requested that further to receiving the briefing note on statutory duties he would like this subject to be brought to Committee in the next municipal year.

The Chair queried the figures for the increased numbers of foster carers. The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that recruitment continues but at the same time foster carers are also retiring or moving on.

The Chair noted that for social worker satisfaction Thurrock was surveyed as 12th nationally and second in the region.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help stated that they challenge themselves constantly to make sure they are providing the right environment for social workers and this includes manageable caseloads, regular supervision, opportunities to learn and ensuring social workers have a voice and feel empowered. It is a strong region for social care with no inadequate authorities. Ofsted feedback is it is a good culture and managers are working alongside social workers.

25. Stable Homes, Built on Love: Government Implementation Strategy and Consultation on Children's Social Care Reform 2023

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help presented the report to the Committee.

On the 16th June 2022, Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, received a report on the Josh McAllister's Care Review of Children's Social Care and the National Safeguarding Panel Review of Child Protection following the deaths of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson. The Care Review contained 80 recommendations that will require 2.6 billion pounds of funding to deliver. This report is regarding the Government's response to the review and recommendations titled "Stable Homes; Built on Love". The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help outlined the summary actions from the report which are identified as 5 pillars.

Councillor Kerin commented that it seemed the focus is on trying to intervene early and support families. He noted there are 12 Local Authorities sharing 45 million pounds, he queried if that translates to funding of just under 4 million pounds being expected.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help responded that she did not know as it was a pilot. She was clear that early help is the foundation to keep children safe at home. She highlighted that once children reach adulthood they need someone and often they return to their family. The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that the Family Hubs funding is ring fenced and a business case has been completed. They have to complete regular reports and if they don't spend the money on services they will have to give it back.

Councillor Kerin queried when a full report will be brought to Committee.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help suggested the end of 2023.

Councillor Panjala queried how many social workers were currently agency workers.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help stated that there are 40 in Children's social care. She stated that the Government would like there to be less and it is always the department's aim to have more permanent staff as it provides consistency for families and is cheaper than using agency workers.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help highlighted that the consultation is now open and will close on 11 May 2023.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the Government's implementation strategy for reforms to children's social care and the potential impact these will have on service delivery over the next few years.**
- 1.2 That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee note that the implementation strategy is open for consultation until 11th May 2023.**

26. Thurrock Childcare Sufficiency Annual Assessment 2022

The Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND presented the report. She explained that the report has come back to Committee to explain what the team is doing to support childcare settings in Thurrock. The Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND confirmed that they work hard with their settings and the settings are grateful for the help and support provided.

Councillor Kerin thanked the Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND for the report and for listening to what the committee had requested. He queried if the numbers are moving in the right direction.

The Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND responded that they work with any new providers and help them to look for new premises. When S106 money is available they put a hat in their ring. We encourage them to open where we want them to open. The Childcare Sufficiency Assessment report also informs providers of where they might want to open a business.

The Chair asked officers about the recent incident reported in the press about the nursery in Chadwell St Mary.

The Strategic Lead for School Effectiveness and SEND responded that it was reported to the department on the day it happened. They have worked with the setting, supported parents and written to them and when they are ready, they will help them to find a new provider. She confirmed both children are safe and the investigation is ongoing. The provider manager has resigned.

RESOLVED:

1.1 That Children's Services O&S review the requested additional report relating to the Annual Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2022 and offer any additional comment or feedback.

27. School Capital Programme Update 2022/23

The Strategic Lead for Education Support Services presented the report to the Committee. She confirmed that the report will be presented to Cabinet tomorrow for approval.

Councillor Anderson thanked the Strategic Lead for Education Support Services for the report. He commented that the detailed costing in the appendix was very useful and will allow members to scrutinise more effectively if issues arise.

Councillor Kerin commended officers on avoiding issues around shortage of school places. Councillor Kerin stated that he was happy with recommendation 1.1 but queried the other recommendations as Overview and Scrutiny cannot make decisions.

The Democratic Services Officer clarified that recommendations 1.2, 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5 need to be read in the context of recommendation 1.1 *"that the Children Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee consider and recommend the following decisions to Cabinet"*.

Councillor Kerin responded that he was not happy with recommendation 1.4 given recent events and that decisions can be limited to just two individuals, the Director and Portfolio holder.

Councillor Johnson commented that they could change the recommendation to state that they will report back to Overview and Scrutiny Committee with any major changes.

The Chair agreed the recommendation could say that the matter will be returned to Overview and Scrutiny Committee to ensure accountability of the lead officer and Portfolio holder.

The Strategic Lead for Education Support Services also agreed to this.

An additional recommendation was proposed by the Chair that *“the Committee notes that the matter will come back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee throughout the process”*. This was seconded by Councillor Anderson.

The Parent Governor Representative highlighted that extra schools bring extra traffic outside them and stressed that there is a need to protect children going to school. Barriers, bollards and cones are required and there are not enough traffic wardens.

The Strategic Lead for Education Support Services responded that when they expand a school a planning application is made and as with all planning applications the Highways team will look at it and will highlight any issues that may arise of this nature.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Children’s Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee consider and recommend the following decisions to Cabinet.**
- 1.2 To approve the commencement of the procurement process in accordance with Council & UK procurement procedures to appoint 1. A Design and multi discipline project Team, for the Tilbury Pioneer aspect of the School Capital Programme and 2. Following planning approval and the production of a full technical specification, undertake a further procurement exercise to appoint a Principal Contractor to take forward the proposed Tilbury Pioneer scheme.**
- 1.3 To approve the commencement of the procurement process in accordance with Council & UK procurement procedures to appoint Designers and Project Teams, for the School Capital Programme and appoint the Principal Contractors to take forward the proposed scheme.**
- 1.4 That authority be delegated to the Director of Children’s Services, in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder, to enter into any form of agreement following the award of the agreements arising from 1.2 above in compliance with the Council’s procurement regulations.**
- 1.5 Note the recent in-year accommodation works that have been commenced in order to ensure sufficient pupil places for 2022/2023 in-year applications.**

- 1.6 The Committee notes that this matter will be brought back to Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee throughout the process.**

28. Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Partnership

The Independent Chairperson and Scrutineer for the Local Children Safeguarding Partnership presented the annual Thurrock Local Children Safeguarding Partnership (TLCSP) report to the Committee for 2021/22. She explained that whilst regular updates are provided to the Committee by Thurrock Local Children Safeguarding Partnership the report gives a full overview of the work completed by TLCSP.

The Committee Members did not have any questions on this item.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That the Committee note the LSCP Annual Report 2021/22 and the work undertaken against the priorities.**

29. Children's Transport - One year extension to the current framework 2023/24

The Strategic Lead for Education Support Services presented the report to the Committee. She explained that the report proposes that all the current contracts procured under the framework are extended for one year to allow time for the service to review options for a full re-procurement of the Children's Transport for the start of the academic year 2024/2025 to ensure best value is achieved and allows for new transport operators to join during the contract period.

The Strategic Lead for Education Support Services further explained that they are looking at what other Local Authorities do and across the market and need further time to complete this work.

Councillor P Arnold queried why this wasn't looked at last year.

The Strategic Lead for Education Support Services responded that Children's transport was previously in the public realm directorate but has now permanently moved to the Children's Services Directorate. More extensive research is needed to benchmark against other Local Authorities.

Councillor Johnson highlighted that it is a demand led service and to make it fit with a policy is challenging. He stated that they need more time to get it right.

Councillor Kerin queried whether they are asking for breathing space to find a more permanent option.

The Strategic Lead for Education Support Services agreed this was correct.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 Children's Overview and Scrutiny recommend Cabinet agree that the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Education Portfolio Holder is authorised to extend any transport contracts under the current framework, which expire in July 2023 for a one-year period.**

30. Work Programme

The Chair thanked the Committee, Directors and Officers for all their hard work over the last year.

The Chair agreed a report on Statutory duties should be brought to the committee next municipal year, an update on the Adult Community College and an update on the Family Hubs programme should be brought back to Committee towards the end of 2023.

The meeting finished at 9.04 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