

## **Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10 February 2015 at 7.00 pm**

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- Present:** Councillors James Halden (Vice-Chair, in the Chair), Charles Curtis, Martin Kerin and Graham Snell
- Reverend Darren Barlow, Church of England Representative
- Apologies:** Councillors Val Morris-Cook (Chair) and Tunde Ojetola
- Patricia Wilson, Roman Catholic Church Representative
- In attendance:** Carmel Littleton, Director of Children's Services  
Andrew Carter, Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes  
Ruth Brock, School Improvement Manager  
Alan Cotgrove  
Wendy Warman, Development Manager  
Saania Ali, Youth Cabinet Representative  
James Henderson, Youth Cabinet Representative  
Stephanie Cox, Senior Democratic Services Officer
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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.

### **24. Minutes**

The Minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 6 January 2015, were approved as a correct record.

### **25. Items of Urgent Business**

There were no urgent items of business.

### **26. Declaration of Interests**

Reverend Barlow declared a non-pecuniary interest in the general business of the meeting as he had children attending St Thomas Primary School, Grays Convent and Palmer's College. He was also a trustee and corporation member at Palmer's College and his wife was employed at St Thomas Primary School.

Councillor Curtis declared a non-pecuniary interest in the general business of the meeting by virtue that he had grandchildren attending Bulphan School and is a Governor at the Ockendon Academy.

The Chair advised that he proposed to bring forward 'Item 7, Youth Consultation – alternative ways of working to support young people across Thurrock' on the agenda, following which the remaining items would be taken in the order printed. Members were in agreement.

**27. Youth Consultation alternative ways of working to support young people across Thurrock**

The Development Manager introduced the report which outlined the results of the consultation that had been supported by Youth Cabinet, in order to examine alternative delivery models for youth activities across Thurrock.

Members were advised that the response to the consultation had been positive and that 383 responses had been received and that following further focus groups and polls on social media the name 'Inspire' had been chosen to brand provision going forward.

A Youth Cabinet representative explained that she was part of the Youth Hub Committee, and felt that this had been a good opportunity to review the needs of young people. She added that the last refresh had been some time ago and that the recent work would be of benefit to young people in Thurrock.

Councillor Kerin observed that it was important to work with young people regarding Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET) figures as this affected their age group and he valued their opinion. Members were advised that it was important to take into account the views of young people and that there had been a significant reduction in NEET figures to 5.4%.

A Youth Cabinet representative advised Members that the Youth Cabinet were keen to run more campaigns and he thought an examination of the NEET issue would be of interest. He informed Members that he would report back to the Youth Cabinet Participation Officer to see if this could be progressed further.

Rev Barlow highlighted that responses varied widely across the Borough and was concerned that young people in isolated communities such as Bulphan, Fobbing and West Tilbury could become disconnected from service provision. In response the Development Manager assured Members that young people were surveyed in schools and youth groups across the Borough.

Councillor Curtis asked whether partnership working could be developed to offer a wider breadth of services with local providers, especially in light of budget savings and the closure of Culver House, and whether youth clubs could be run at other facilities such as the Ockendon School on evenings and weekends.

The Director of Children's Services advised that they were looking to increase partnership working to offer a wider breadth of services with local providers. Councillor Halden encouraged Youth Cabinet be involved in the Supporting Pathways into Work for Young People task and finish review and requested

that they be invited to the first meeting. Democratic Services advised that Youth Cabinet representatives would be invited once the date was arranged.

Councillor Halden felt that the Council was very good at consulting with Youth Cabinet on issues that affected young people directly, but questioned whether much work was being undertaken in relation to less obvious youth related issues such as regeneration. The Youth Cabinet representative explained that a Regeneration Officer had recently presented at Youth Cabinet and felt that young people's voices were heard, however they would like to see greater feedback on how their views were implemented.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1. That the consultation feedback be noted and the Youth Cabinet formally applauded for the good work they undertook in developing and analysing the feedback.**
- 2. That Members endorse the work of the Project Team, supported by members of the Youth Cabinet, to explore alternative delivery models for Youth Related Activities.**
- 3. That the findings of the youth survey be used to inform services for young people.**

**28. Commissioning of Local Authority Day Nurseries in Tilbury**

The Director of Children's Services briefly introduced the report which set out the recommendations for the commissioning out of two local authority day nurseries in Tilbury, Little Pirates and Neptune Nursery.

The Interim Strategic Leader for School Improvement further added that this would continue to provide high quality service provision.

Members were advised that staff and parents had been consulted and that the main concerns raised included the quality of provision, staffing futures and that the location and number of places remained the same. The Committee were assured that the TUPE scheme would apply for all staff.

Members were concerned how a private enterprise could save £62,000 in the operation of the nurseries whilst generating a profit, and questioned whether a business plan was in place. Members also questioned how realistic the plans were that a provider could be found in light of the budget shortfall, and why the Council could not make the service more profitable.

The Director of Children's Services advised the Committee that:

- It was expected that an external provider could make a capital investment without increasing fees or staff reductions so as to ensure the nurseries profitability and that money could be saved in back office functions. It was reported this was more difficult for the

Local Authority which was only responsible for two nurseries, and that a larger provider would be able to make greater savings in relation to back office or administrative functions.

- In both nurseries the numbers were very good; there was high demand and waiting lists and a demand for funded places.
- A safety net was also in place so that if a suitable provider could not be found the local authority could keep the nurseries “in-house” until an alternative could be identified.
- The nurseries were not losing money and that there had been a considerable amount of interest from external providers to bid for the operation of the day nurseries.
- The Council did not have the capital money required to reinvest into the service to increase profitability.

A Member asked whether by commissioning out the two day nurseries if there was a danger that the Council could become deskilled, to which officers explained that the Local Authority had minimal oversight as this was driven by statutory partners.

Members were particularly concerned that an external provider would be inclined to increase prices. The Interim Strategic Leader for School Improvement explained that there was considerable scope for expansion at both nurseries as there was not enough provision for 2 year olds to meet demand. It was explained that with greater capital investment a greater profit could be achieved but Members were assured that an affordability factor would be written into the tender. It was further reported that there was not a great amount of variance in the cost of nursery places, as they had to remain competitive, and that a review of prices would be undertaken each year.

Members recognised that the proposal was a sensible idea but were keen that guarantees would be put in place in order to maintain the number of nursery places and guarantee the quality of service provision, to which it was explained that quality would be managed by OFSTED inspections.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1. That the committee note the contents of the report, including the recommendations set out below to be agreed by Cabinet on 11 February 2015.**
  - **That it be agreed to commission out the two local authority run day nurseries in Tilbury as one unit, subject to the service specification, in order to maintain the number of places and service quality.**
  - **That a full range of early years and childcare services continues to be offered in Tilbury including provision for funded early education for two, three and four year olds.**
  - **That it be agreed to proceed to tender, as outlined in the commissioning report included at appendix 1.**

- **That authority be delegated to the Director of Children's Services in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder to proceed to tender and award the Contract to the successful provider.**

## **29. Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board Annual Report 2013-2014**

The Business Manager sent the apologies of the Independent Chair of the Local Safeguarding Board and introduced the annual report which provided an account of the activity that had been conducted to oversee safeguarding services within Thurrock and to assess their effectiveness.

It was reported that the membership of the board from each agency was very good, and included five statutory partners such as the Police, NHS alongside representatives from Education, the Community and Voluntary Sector and commissioned service providers.

Members were advised that there had been a policy development refresh of Pan Essex Child Protection Procedures and the key achievements of 2013-14 were highlighted which included:

- The 2013 Conference on the Voice of the child.
- A managed review of fabricated illness.
- A responsive multi agency learning and development programme.
- The launch of the new LSCB website which to date had reached 29,461 hits and was used by both professionals and the community.
- The examination of water safety and child deaths in swimming pools.
- An information stand at the Big Lunch and Tilbury Family Festival events.
- Work with Youth Cabinet to evolve the young ambassador's programme for the LSCB.
- The survivors of Child Abuse conference.
- Walk Online Roadshows, in response to Police intelligence that victims of online crime were getting younger and younger.

The Committee were advised that the service had been awarded runner-up in the category of 'Innovator of the Year' at the Local Authority Awards and were funded through partnership funding, which had not increased in four years.

Members thanked all those involved for an excellent report, welcomed the greater focus on outcomes and commended the LSCB on their key achievements.

Officers explained that some outcomes had been particularly challenging, such as the Voice of the Child and ensuring that the needs of young people who required support were met.

Rev Barlow asked whether in light of the recent report from the BBC regarding the online issues that faced young people, if the funding was sufficient for the task that lay ahead. In response officers explained that it was important to examine funding not only in financial terms but in relation to resources available. It was reported that practice was regularly examined across all agencies to ensure they were effective as they could be, such as the Early Offer of Help Service.

Rev Barlow further observed that the £151,000 budget was comparatively small to the budget of the local authority, to which the Director of Children's Services explained that although the budget available was relatively small; in reality the LSCB had access through its statutory partners to an operating capacity of many of millions of pounds.

Councillor Curtis questioned whether the statutory partners still fully supported the work of the LSCB in light of the budget challenges faced by all agencies, to which officers assured Members that all agencies were committed to this work.

Councillor Halden recognised that Essex Police had recently embedded a new Victims Charter and asked whether all agencies should have a Victims Charter, not just the Police. In response, officers explained that there was a national charter that had been adopted and all agencies had its own victim support process.

Councillor Halden was concerned that information sharing between agencies was not as good as it should be, and questioned what power the LSCB had to hold agencies to account. The Business Manager advised that there was no specific power, but the LSCB had the right to challenge its statutory partners and others and this feedback was provided and acted upon by board members.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1. That the progress made on children's safeguarding for the 12 month period April 2013 to March 2014 be noted.**
- 2. That the Committee consider and comment upon the report.**

**30. Learning from the Serious Case Review of "Julia"**

The Head of Children's Social Care advised Members of the process of the serious case review, following which the Business Manger reported that Regulation 5 of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board Regulations 2006 set out the requirement for a serious case review to be undertaken in instances where abuse or neglect of a child was known or suspected, and where either the child died or was seriously harmed and there was cause for concern as to how the Authority, their Board Partners or relevant people worked together to safeguard the child.

The Committee were advised that this case had been referred to the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board Serious Case Review Panel and they were satisfied that it met the specified criteria, following which a case review had been undertaken using the SCIE Learning Together Methodology.

A Member questioned how all agencies had been notified of the serious case review and whether this had included the Chief Executive of Thurrock Council. Members of the Committee were concerned that this case had not been highlighted to Elected Members earlier, until details were released in the local press.

The Director of Children's Services reported that the case review had been included on the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme, and that it had been referred to the next available meeting after the report had been published online.

Members were advised of the SCIE review process and that it used the case to identify where processes could be improved so that it was learning specific.

The Head of Children's Social Care advised Members in detail of the seven specific findings of the serious case review, which were outlined in the report.

Members indicated that there was no doubt that the young person was let down a number of agencies and her family, and observed that it was evident that there was a lack of good communication and no oversight or coordination between the different agencies who were involved.

The Head of Children's Social Care highlighted that information was being shared; however there was not sufficient analysis of the information or challenge when matters were not progressed.

Councillor Halden was alarmed at the fact that on a number of occasions there was no record of a response by Children's Social Care. The Head of Children's Social Care shared this alarm at the poor recording and reported that the service was auditing cases to ensure accurate recording.

Councillor Halden further reported his concern regarding the mistaken belief that the young person could not be seen without her mother, and questioned whether further training for Social Workers was required. In response officers explained that they did not believe this was a result of a lack of understanding but agreed that this needed action.

Councillor Kerin highlighted that the role of GP's was critical, as everyone was registered with a GP and they played a valuable role in the reporting of missed appointments. He further questioned whether there was a Safeguarding GP for Thurrock and felt that if there had of been the outcome for the young person could have been different.

In response the Committee were advised that each GP surgery in Thurrock had a designated safeguarding lead and GP's regularly attended meetings of

the board, as well as other work that included regular slots on GP forums and a training programme for doctors to become Child Sexual Exploitation Champions.

Councillor Snell highlighted that despite having identified the young person was having difficulties at school the case was closed and felt that the case should have not been closed as non-engagement by the mother was not a valid excuse. He added that if Social Workers had identified this further harm could have been prevented.

In response the Head of Children's Social Care explained that the purpose of the review was to identify where improvements could be made, and assured Members that one single Social Worker could not close a whole case, rather this was a whole system response.

Members raised concerns regarding the reporting process of the case to Elected Members in general and Overview and Scrutiny in particular, and felt that the serious case review should have been actively brought to Members attention earlier.

Members questioned how there were no concerns identified for the young person's half-sibling, despite the fact that she would have been exposed to a similar level of risk. In response officers explained that this was why it was important to produce a single assessment for a whole family in order to take a holistic approach, rather than a single method of assessment on individuals.

Members asked how the service would tackle non-engagement of a parent in future, to which the Head of Children's Social Care explained that a Children in Need Plan would be established and firm targets set so that if these were not met by a parent the Children's Social Care team could escalate the case as required, whether to a Supervision Order or a Court, in order to illicit change.

Councillor Curtis asked whether Children's Social Care had enough powers to elicit necessary change, to which the Director of Children's Services explained that powers rested with the Court, but that it was important the case was escalated by the service to enact these powers.

Rev Barlow observed that there was much preoccupation with the mother and questioned whether the reason why the case was not escalated was due to a high workload of the Social Workers. Officers felt that the workload of Social Workers was reasonable, rather the issues identified were regarding the lack of appropriate escalation of the case from a Children in Need plan to a Children Protection Plan and ultimately to the Court.

The Committee feared that the same problems could happen again in future and were concerned whether this was an isolated case or an inherent structural problem. The Head of Children's Social Care explained that everyone remained vigilant and that mechanisms were in place to ensure that concerns were identified and acted upon as soon as possible. He further



added that he could not guarantee that similar instances could not occur again in future, however he was confident that the same mistakes could not be made again as there were new mechanisms in place and greater awareness cross-agencies.

Members were sobered to learn that over twenty professionals had been involved in the young person's case, and were concerned that sufficient measures were not in place to prevent the same mistakes in future.

The Committee were advised that every agency involved in the case had contributed to the action plan and inter-agency training had been delivered to overcome the challenges identified. The Director of Children's Services added that all individuals involved in the case had also contributed to the review to establish the learning points.

Members stated that the report was upsetting reading but was well contextualised and presented, and requested that it be easily accessible.

Councillor Halden requested that officers undertake a Peer Review to ensure that lessons could be learned.

The Chair proposed a number of new recommendations to which the Committee agreed; as it was felt it was not adequate to simply note the report.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1. That the Committee welcomed the paper from the Local Safeguarding Children's Board, but Members were extremely concerned with the findings.**
- 2. That officers be instructed to refer a protocol to the Corporate Parenting Committee, detailing procedures for informing members and the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee of such serious issues in future.**
- 3. That officers be instructed to prepare a report for Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding a form of a comprehensive peer review for Thurrock's Social Work team based on the findings of the report.**
- 4. That the Committee requests that the Cabinet Member to make a statement to the full council to explain what action the Council will take to prevent such corporate failings happening again.**
- 5. That the multi-agency action plan be referred to the next practicable meeting of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**

**31. Work Programme**

Democratic Services highlighted the remaining items on the work programme, and advised Members that the items requested on the previous item would be included.

The Committee were advised that six items were outstanding on the work programme, and if the multi-agency action plan could be referred to the next meeting as requested by Members, it was recommended that some less urgent items be updated in the form of a briefing note due to time constraints.

The Director of Children's Services advised that an update regarding the Admissions Forum could be supplied to Members in the form of a briefing note, to which the Committee agreed; however Members requested that all other items remain on the work programme for March.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1. That an update on the Admissions Forum be provided to Members in the form of a briefing note.**
- 2. That the Serious Case Peer Review and Multi-Agency Action Plan be added to the work programme as appropriate.**
- 3. That the work programme be noted.**

**The meeting finished at 9.19 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](mailto:Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk)**