

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 18 December 2014 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Bukky Okunade (Chair), James Halden (Vice-Chair), Jan Baker, Charles Curtis and Joycelyn Redsell

Natalie Carter, Thurrock Open Door
Jackie Howell, Thurrock One Team Foster Care Association

Apologies: Councillors Sue Gray, Susan Little and Sharon Smith

In attendance: Carmel Littleton, Director of Children's Services
Paul Coke, Service Manager (Children & Families)
Neale Laurie – Service Manager
Roland Minto – Service Manager
Keeley Pullen – Head Teacher for Virtual School
Matthew Boulter, Principal 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.

14. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 September 2014 were agreed as a correct record.

15. Declaration of Interests

None.

16. Items of Urgent Business

The Committee noted that an additional report titled 'Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report 2013-14' had been scheduled for this meeting and would be taken in due course.

17. Education Results for Looked After Children

The Committee was informed that there had been an increase in the number of Looked After Children in year 6 who were eligible for key stage 2 tests. Within this cohort, five of the children were not at a required educational level to sit the tests and this represented 29% of the cohort. All five children had special educational needs. In writing and maths, the group had achieved above or in line the national and regional averages. Attainment in reading was above the regional average but below the national average. Performance had declined since 2013 but because of the small numbers involved the presence

of the five children who were unable to sit the tests had significantly affected performance. All children in this cohort had now gone into secondary education with a transition plan to personalise and assist in their future educational development.

Members were assured that the service tracked the children throughout their school career even when they changed school or came in and out of care. Relationships with schools were very good and many worked with the Council to provide a tailored service for the children.

Twenty three pupils were of year 11 age and eligible to take GCSE exams. 30% of this cohort did not take the exams for various reasons including being in prison or being asylum seekers. One pupil achieved five A-C grades, one pupil achieved four A-Cs. 91% that completed year 11 were now in college, apprenticeships or sixth form. Next year, the service was predicting 18% of the cohort would achieve five A-C grades.

In response to a question it was confirmed there was no plan to make budget savings in this service.

RESOLVED: That the Committee note the educational outcomes of key stage 2 and 4 in 2013/14 and the measures in place for 2015/16 to further support the education of looked after children.

18. Item of Urgent Business - Independent Review Officers Annual Report 2013-14

The Committee learnt that Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) were a statutory obligation to be assigned to all looked after child. Requirements were to assign an IRO within ten days of a child coming into care. Thurrock's current average was twenty four hours. IROs in Thurrock had increased from four to five due to an increase in workload but also an expansion of IRO remit. Thurrock IROs had reviewed 659 cases in the last financial year, 98.5% of which were to agreed timescales. It was a strong service where the children themselves were able to engage in their own review and this was an aspect the Council wished to encourage and increase in future years.

Officers stated that the number of Looked after children in Thurrock was similar to other councils of the same size but the focus for the service was to improve the discharge of children from care. Officers assured Members that any child discharged was subject to monitoring either through a child in need plan, child protection plan or other. Those older children in care who regularly showed desires to return to their family home were reviewed as well for a suitable resolution.

The Committee discussed how the IROs escalated concerns in the department and were pleased that none had been escalated to director level. Officers responded that most issues were related to contact or care planning and were mainly resolved by team managers. The one issue escalated to head of service had been where social care and the IRO disagreed on the

course of action to be taken. Children and carers could self-refer concerns and could do this either through the council or Open Door, which was an independent advocacy service.

RESOLVED: That the Committee continues to monitor the activity of the IROs and request any further information it requires in its scrutiny role.

19. Information on Recent External Placements for Young People

The Council placed 73% of young people within twenty miles of their home. The national average was 77%, although the regional average was 68%. Members were also made aware that the Council was now liable for the cost of any child in care who was remanded in custody who was not then served a sentence. The cost for the current year relating to this was £234,000. The projected spend for external placements for this year was £9.4 million, which was £200,000 over budget. However, officers reminded Members that the specialist cases involved meant that this figure could fluctuate either way. It was hoped that a certain placement would end this coming weekend with the person returning to their family. This would have significant savings implications.

The Committee briefly discussed how the council decided when to use in-house fosterers and when to go out to the independent sector. Officers explained that they chose in-house fostering as often as they could but certain situations relating to a young person or persons meant that independent fostering away from the area was sometimes the preferred option. Extended family or friends placements were also considered highly desirable but this was obviously subject to the proper checks to ensure it was safe and suitable for the child.

RESOLVED: That the committee note the efforts made by officers to choose appropriate resources for looked after children, including our more difficult to place children.

20. Housing for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Officers outlined the 'Staying Put' initiative from government which facilitated young people in care to stay with their foster carers beyond eighteen years of age. The young person could be in employment, education or training. The positives of this initiative were to allow young people to develop relationships with their foster families beyond immediate care and to provide stability in their lives. The challenges were that it reduced the available space for new foster placements. The One Team Foster Association representative also stated that if other younger foster children were living at the house, it would need to be considered whether the older teenager's actions were appropriate and did not negatively influence the younger children.

Officers also explained the new rules surrounding universal credit whereby a looked after child, once eighteen, would receive a universal benefit payment which included their housing benefit. They would then be required to pay their

foster carer the sum, the difference in foster payment being made up by the Council. Officers stressed that this new arrangement would be a challenge for some young people and they would need to be supported in taking responsibility for their income. It was stated that this was an unknown area and the Council would need to see how it worked and develop a policy appropriately.

During the debate it was clarified that the setting up home allowance was a one off payment of £2000 that was given to a young person to buy goods that would be needed to set up a home, for example, a washing machine. This money was controlled by the council and not given to the young person to solely manage.

Officers believed that any policy relating to 'Staying Put' would be agreed internally within the department and then sent to this committee for comment.

RESOLVED: That:

- 1. The Committee monitor the impact of the Staying Put Policy on foster placement and finance.**
- 2. The Committee monitor the impact of Universal Credit on care leavers.**

21. Thurrock Fostering Service

The Committee was informed that a team manager had left during the summer and the service was going to trial a structure without replacing this manager post to see whether it was sustainable or not. Officers also highlighted that the need to recruit foster carers was still required. The Committee agreed that councillors could help greatly in raising the profile of foster caring in the community.

A brief discussion on asylum seekers was had and it was discussed that they were not placed in families until they were assessed for suitability and safety.

Councillor Curtis noted that Alan Johnson had retired as Chair of the Fostering Panel and noted his gratitude for all his work over the years.

RESOLVED: That the Committee note both the current work of the service and the challenges that lay ahead, as well as recognising and supporting officers' work to develop the service.

22. Adoption Report Outlining Process and Performance

The Council was looking at alternative consortium arrangements following Havering leaving the Southend and Thurrock consortium. There was an option to work with a major national organisation but this had yet to be fully explored. If this was agreed there were potential impacts on current staff but as yet nothing had been decided.

Officers assured Members that the council had a very good relationship with Southend Council and there would be potential to work together in the future. In response to Member questions, officers explained that being part of a national consortium allowed the council to access policy development and leading research.

RESOLVED: That

1. **The Committee note the discussions that have taken place to date in identifying potential new partnership arrangements and support officers in their future pursuit of options to ensure sound and cost effective outcomes for children.**
2. **An update on the service be provided at the next meeting.**

23. Work Programme

RESOLVED: That

1. **The Work Programme be noted, with the addition of an Adoption Update report to be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee.**
2. **A report on the addition of a health service co-optee be produced at a suitable time.**

The meeting finished at 9.00 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**