

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 5 January 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Elizabeth Rigby (Chair), Steve Liddiard (Vice-Chair), Abbie Akinbohun, Daniel Chukwu, Barry Johnson, Sue Hooper, Sue Shinnick and Jennifer Smith

Christopher Bennett, Vice Chair, Children in Care Council
Annie Guidotti, Thurrock Open Door
Sharon Smith, Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association
Jenny Josling, Vice Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association

Apologies: Rafael Antunes, Chair, Children in Care Council

In attendance: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Joseph Tynan, Assistant Director
Michael Addo-Boateng, Interim Developmental Role (DNLAC) & Safeguarding Children Specialist Nurse (Lead for CDR)
Helen Farmer, Thurrock CCG
Joanne Guerin, Thurrock CCG
Sue Green, Strategic Lead Commissioning
Naintara Khosla, Strategic Lead, Looked After Children
Mandy Moore, Strategic Lead - Business Intelligence
Ruth Murdock, Strategic Lead of Quality Assurance and Reviewing
Keeley Pullen, Head Teacher for Virtual School
Janet Simon, Strategic Lead, Looked After Children
Ben Tovey, Strategic Lead Housing Solutions and Homelessness Team
Kenna-Victoria Healey, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being live streamed to the Council's online webcast channel.

23. Minutes

The minutes of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 1 September 2020 was approved as a true and correct record subject to the last paragraph on page 10 being re-written to the following:

Councillor Liddiard commented on consultations with Councillors in that he still felt regardless of training most Elected Members did not understand their role when it came to being a Corporate Parent. He suggested there needed to be a change of communications for Elected Members, such as short videos or soundbites which could be sent either via email or other forms such as text message. Councillor Redsell agreed that Members needed to be involved

more in training and communications, she continued by congratulating Officers for how far the Committee had come since it started.

24. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

25. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

26. Children's Social Care Performance

The Strategic Lead for Business Intelligence introduced to report to Members and in doing so advised there was a good overall performance of looked after children, in addition the after-care service was also improving.

Members heard there was continuous focus on encouraging care leavers to keep in touch with the after-care service and ensuring that these young people were in education or employment.

It was explained the report highlighted the impact on the Social Care team since the initial lockdown in March 2020 due to Covid-19. Members heard there were currently 300 looked after children and 275 were Care Leavers. During discussions Members were advised that the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children entering the Borough had reduced, as preferred routes had been through the Ports, for example through Dover. Officers explained there was an expectation for numbers to increase in the coming months due to the winter weather.

The Strategic Lead for Business Intelligence continued by advising Members the data within the report took into account a change in Legislation which placed additional responsibilities upon the Care Leaving Services under the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

It was mentioned how the Initial Health Assessments (IHA) had been improving and during September 2020 the number of completed IHA within 20 working days was now 75% compared to the 50% to the previous year.

The Chair of the Committee thanked Officers for the report and sought if there were any questions from Members.

Councillor Chukwu queried as to the recruitment of Foster Carers. The Strategic Lead for Looked After Children explained the Foster Carer Strategy along with the branding for recruiting Foster Carers was currently going through a refresh, with ideas such as offering Foster Carers within Thurrock Council tax rebates to encourage local people to join the Foster Carer team.

It was explained once the new branding had been agreed it would be reported to the Committee for their comments. Officers further advised during the

pandemic the Council had accepted nine new Foster Carers with a further thirteen applications to be reviewed.

Councillor Johnson enquired as to if a Care Leaver did not require a Personal Adviser, could they change their mind at a later date and seek support. Officers explained there were tight protocols regarding Care Leavers and Personal Advisers, however should a Personal Adviser not be required, it was for the young person to put this into writing. The Strategic Lead for Looked After Children continued to explain if a young person wished support for a varied period of time this could be arranged and discussed within the team.

Councillor Akinbohun thanked Officers for the report and queried as to the number of complaints and concerns received within the Social Care Service. The Strategic Lead for Business Intelligence advised that the complaints data was held by the Complaints Team, however she could get this information to the Councillor outside of the meeting.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That members note the areas of improvement in Children's Social Care and the work undertaken to manage demand for statutory Social Care Services.**
- 2. For any specific areas of interest to be flagged for inclusion/expansion within the next report.**

27. Children Looked After and Care Leaver Sufficiency Strategy

The Strategic Lead of Commissioning presented the report and in doing so gave an overview of the Children Looked After and Care Leavers Sufficiency Strategy which insured the duties of the Council were met.

It was explained the strategy looked at a long-term vision as well as bringing teams together across the authority with a focus of development of local placements within the borough.

Members heard the quality of placements strongly related to the children and young people having stability within care, it was therefore the aim of the strategy to ensure that across all the areas of services supporting children, Officers inspired to achieve the best possible placements and housing for all young people.

Officers explained they were working with the participation and engagement team to be able to ensure the views of children and young people were included within the development of the strategy. It was therefore decided to develop this as one of the key priorities of the strategy "open speech to ensure the voice of children and young people is at the heart of its planning".

The Strategic Lead of Commissioning commented placements over 30 miles tended to be used when there was specialist nature, as there were fewer

providers available locally to meet specific needs.

It was explained at the end of March 2020 there were 298 children looked after within Thurrock this was a reduction from 2018, and was also lower than the statistical neighbour average. Members enquired whether the Council were meeting the demands of accommodation for young people. Officers clarified they were currently meeting the demands and they were looking for consistency to be able to offer all young children and young people local placements.

The Chair of the Committee queried as to whether children within the local area were able to be supported closer to the borough Officers explained all placements even those furthest away would receive the same support and care needed for the young person in question.

The Assistant Director of Children's Services and Early Help commented that discussions were had within the Eastern region to ensure that the best accommodation possible was given for young people.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That members support the delivery of the Children Looked After and Care Leavers Placement Sufficiency Strategy January 2021 – January 2024.**
- 2. That members note the information contained in the report and accompanying strategy.**

28. Independent Reviewing Officer - Annual Report

The Strategic Lead of Quality, Assurance and Reviewing presented the annual report to the Corporate Parenting Committee in order for it to meet statutory requirement.

Members heard that the appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer for a child or young person in the care of the local authority was a legal requirement under the section 118 of the adoption act 2002. In addition it was advised during the reporting period there were five Independent reviewing officers, experienced social workers and all had the relevant and appropriate skills to carry out such tasks.

Officers continued to advise Members timeliness of reviews were being completed on time recording over 90% completed within timescales. It was then commented that during a recent activity day the views of children and young people were sought by the independent reviewing service and of this feedback received 100% of children or young people wanted their reports shared with them in advance of their meeting, 91% of children stated they would like to participate in their own review, and 41% stated they would like they would like to share their own view. It was also noted that young people

were not worried about the length of time they review meetings took, however 80% of them stated they would not like their reviews to take place at school.

The Independent Reviewing Officer continued by informing Members there had been an increase of 24% to the number of reviews held.

The Chair thanked Officers for the excellent report, she commented she was pleased with the increase of completed assessment within time.

RESOLVED:

For the Corporate Parenting Committee to review and comment on the IRO Annual report 2019 - 2020 and the recommendations in the report.

29. The Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher for Children Looked After - Academic Year 2019-2020

The headteacher of the virtual school for children looked after presented the report to the committee and in doing so, explained the virtual school monitored and supported the educational process and outcomes for children looked after. She continued to advise the responsibility of the school covered pupils aged between three and 18 years and also included those who had left care during an academic school year.

Members heard the cohort numbers of pupils was part of the virtual school had remained relatively consistent over the academic year, the headteacher of the virtual schools continued to explain due to the cancellation of all exams for the previous year 2020 there was no attainment data to be reported.

She continued by explaining the progress and outcomes of all pupils were still monitored very closely for the academic year and support was still provided for those children transitioning from into years seven and eleven. Members heard the virtual school had been working with all schools and colleges to support pupils as they moved into new educational establishments.

Members were advised as a minimum requirement every looked after child age between three and eighteen years were required to have a Personal Educational Plan (PEP) that was reviewed as a minimum of every six months. It was explained that reviews were to be taken more frequently and therefore PEP were produced every school term. It was further explained at the end of the academic year the PEP compliance rates were 99% with only one pupil who had not had a PEP within the designated timescales.

The headteacher of the virtual school mentioned that 39% of the whole cohort had been identified as either having an educational health care plan or saving additional help as SEN support, this meant that statistically Thurrocks looked after children had a high level of need compare to children nationally. She continued to explain when comparing thoughts are looked after children with all looked after children nationally in 19–20 they were 59.9% of children with special educational needs, 27.2% had an EHCP and 28.7% had SEN support,

therefore compared to the looked after children nationally Thurrock had fewer pupils with SEND.

Members were notified of the number of support measures taken when the announcement to close schools happened in March 2020, despite working virtually the service adopted a business approach and made adaptations when necessary to ensure there is no disruption to the role and support given to students; such as schools offering online lessons and learning which had been improved for students going into the second lockdown.

Councillor Liddiard enquired as to whether Foster Carers were due to provide Wi-Fi for students to enable them to complete their online learning. The Strategic Lead for children looked after explained although they hadn't had any issues with Wi-Fi raised by Foster Carers they were supporting all looked after children during lockdown including online learning and any issues should be reported via Social Workers.

During discussions it was commented that some schools were struggling due to the challenge of closures, however we were working hard to maintain social bubbles and support for students whether that be online or within classrooms for a number of children. It was explained many schools were working creatively due to COVID-19 and offering online learning. As well as this schools are working closely with public health and local authority colleagues.

The headteacher of a virtual schools explained they were supporting schools and Foster Carers as well as children such as year 11 students who may wish to resit any exams assessment such as English or maths.

The Chair of the Committee enquired as to the percentage of children attending schools throughout the pandemic such as those children of key workers. The headteacher for virtual schools explained they were currently collecting such data, however most children didn't attend school in March 2020 due to the first lockdown. She continued to advise that schools were offering online learning and 97% of this was being up kept.

RESOLVED:

The Committee approves the Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher for the academic year 2019-2020 and uses this information to acknowledge, evaluate and, if appropriate, challenge the services that are provided for all CLA.

30. Joint Housing Protocol for Care Leavers

The Strategic Lead for Children in Need and Child Protection presented the report and in doing so, explained how the local authority had statutory duties and responsibilities for young people leaving care in order to support them into independent living as adults. Members heard that depending on whether or not a young person was ready to live independently there were a number of

accommodation options available for them aged 18 or over, which included remaining with former Foster Carers and the staying put arrangement, moving into supported housing, moving into other independent living situation such as shared accommodation with other young people, or where a young person remained in full-time education or was at university the children's social care team would support the young person in order to access adequate funds to secure accommodation suitable for their needs during term time and would in addition support them to access accommodation during school holidays.

The Committee heard that under the protocol there were also a number of accommodations highlighted that were not suitable for independent living this included bed and breakfasts.

The Strategic Lead continued to notify Members Officers were working with Housing colleagues and using the Headstart fund in order to support young people to become independent young adults after leaving care. Officers highlighted the importance of putting the needs of the young person first so that they could be supported through the transition into independent living.

Councillor Rigby, Chair of the Committee thanked Officers for the report she continued by seeking if a young person was to stay with the Foster Carer whether the support package stayed with them post 18 years old. The Strategic Lead for Children in Need and Child Protection if a young person stayed in full-time education they would still receive the full rate however the rates adjusted post 18 and if possible the young person was asked to come to contribute to this in some way.

During discussions the Strategic Lead explained that workshops were also available for young people to offer support as thinking about bills and managing tenancies. The representative from Thurrock Open Door advised Open Door ran similar workshops and should any young person wish to attend they could notify the council who could refer them on to her for further advice.

RESOLVED:

- 1. For the Committee to note the statutory duties of the Local Authority to support young people in obtaining suitable accommodation and how we plan to meet these duties.**
- 2. For the Committee to have oversight of the joint protocols and be involved in the ongoing review of delivery across Children's Services and Housing Services.**

31. After Care Report

The Strategic Lead for Children Looked After presented the report to Members which provided them with an update regarding the service provision for Thurrock after-care young adults who had previously been in the local authorities care. She continued to advise Members the after-care service

were transferred to Children Social Care in July 2019.

It was explained that following the OFSTED inspection of Children's Services in November 2020 which graded the children services as good, OFSTED noted there was a need to ensure better partnership with Adult Social Care colleagues to support the transition arrangements for care leavers and particularly for those young people with additional needs.

Members heard that as Corporate Parents the Council were aspirational for their children and young people in care supporting them to achieve in all areas of their life and insuring a smooth transition into adulthood. The Council was committed to listening to children and young people and involving them in decision-making and service development.

The Strategic Lead the Children Looked After explained that unaccompanied asylum seeking children had not received high numbers as it seemed the preferred route was through the port at Dover, however this could change due to the winter weather in future months. It was mentioned the Council were reviewing the needs of young people using the after-care service to ensure they had the opportunities necessary for ongoing education training and employment.

The data received for November 2020 showed the total number of care leavers up to the age of 25 not in employment education or training was 49.8% with no significant change being seen in the last three months. Members heard that Thurrock offered access to the Princes Trust program which enabled young people to build their confidence and access to opportunities such as apprenticeships so they could engage within local communities.

Officers continued to advised Members of the after-care newsletter which updated young people on such topics as online courses, and gave them the links to be able to sign up for such events. In addition the newsletter updated young people on new interesting things happening such as a new WhatsApp group exclusively for care leavers and monthly meetings which were currently being held on Zoom. The newsletter also informed young people on the Inspire Youth Hub and gave details on how to contact colleagues. In addition there were weekly sessions covering topics such as interview skills, writing CVs and applying for college and university places.

Officers explained they were trying to create more opportunities for care leavers to be able to support them transitioning into independent young adults.

The Chair of the Committee commented the difficulty of offering such support such as face-to-face meetings during COVID-19 and queried if care leavers were attending training due to having no employment would they in addition have to find employment to seek support.

The Strategic Lead for Children Looked After explained that Care Leavers

post 18 did not have to find employment in addition to training, she further commented, Officers had a good relationship with young people and were offering a range of opportunities to support employment, training or additional education if required.

RESOLVED:

This report provides Members of the Committee with an overview of the services provided to our young adults. Members are asked to note the contents of the report and the service provision to young adults in the Thurrock Aftercare Service.

32. Corporate Parenting Committee Work Programme 2020/2021

The Committee discussed the work programme, and agreed to a number of reports being included on the Work Programme including:

- Support provided to Care Leavers and Children Looked After during COVID19
- Support provided to Foster Carers during COVID19
- Support offered by the virtual School during COVID 19

RESOLVED:

That the Corporate Parenting Committee agreed for the Work Programme to be updated and include the reports discussed throughout the meeting.

The meeting finished at 8.46 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