

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 12 October 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Sara Muldowney (Chair), Graham Snell (Vice-Chair), Abbie Akinbohun, Alex Anderson, James Thandi (substitute for Sue Little) and Lee Watson

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

In attendance:

Priscilla Bruce-Annan, Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business Manager
Lee Henley, Strategic Lead, Information Management
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills
Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Janet Simon, Interim Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help
Grace Le, 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.

The Chair stated that there was a time limit for the use of the Beehive venue which was until 9.30pm. She said that if the items on the agenda were not concluded by 9.30pm, the meeting would be adjourned and would recommence at the next Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 1 December 2021.

13. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 July 2021 were approved as a true and correct record.

14. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

15. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interests.

16. Youth Cabinet Update

The Youth Cabinet sent their apologies.

17. Report from Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership (LSCP)

The report was presented by Priscilla Bruce-Annan.

Councillor Watson felt that there was little detail in the report and asked to see more details in future reports, particularly the action plan with a RAG rating. The Chair sought more details on the Serious Case Reviews (SCR) of Shae and Ashley and Frankie in regards to the actions taken so far. Priscilla Bruce-Annan explained that upon the completion of a SCR report, a task and finish group was set up to look into the details of the report to identify the action plan to be implemented. The action plan was due to be signed off for Shae and Ashley soon. With the SCR of Frankie, the progress of the action plan had started at the end of last year.

Referring to the Participation and Engagement section of the report, the Chair noted that there was a good engagement between young people and Grangewaters. She commented that previous committee reports had also highlighted the importance of Grangewaters for SEN children. She proposed that the Committee undertake a formal site visit to Grangewaters to view the provisions available there as previous reports had highlighted Grangewaters as an essential service. Councillor Snell felt that a site visit to Grangewaters was not within the remit of Children's Services O&S and had no bearing on the report. He said that Grangewaters could be visited at any time individually as he had been there before. Councillor Watson disagreed and said that it would be good to see the provisions that Grangewaters offered to Thurrock's SEND children.

As most of the Committee Members were not in favour of a committee site visit to Grangewaters, Democratic Services advised the Committee that they would be able to visit Grangewaters outside of a formal site visit if they wished to do so.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted the briefing update.

18. 2020-21 Annual Complaints and Representations Report - Children's Social Care

The report was presented by Lee Henley.

Referring to the table on page 28, Councillor Anderson noted that the timeliness in responding to complaints had improved from the previous year. He recalled that the service had aimed to focus on this area from last year's report and asked what improvements had been made since the report last year. Lee Henley answered that the volume of complaints was low and that the 75% was based on 8 complaints closed and 6 of those were responded to within the timeframe. He explained that Children's Services complaints were complex and that the report showed an improvement from last year.

Councillor Watson asked how much of the received complaints had been upheld and if there was a national benchmark to compare the service's figures against. She also asked if there were improvements that had been made from complaints and whether there were plans in place to decrease the number of complaints. Lee Henley referred to page 32 and 33 and said that nine complaints had been received for Children's Services and four of those had been upheld which was 44%. He explained that there was not a national benchmark but the national public sector local government ombudsman report on complaints had shown that Children's Services received the most complaints. The average figure for this was 67% upheld across the country so Thurrock's 44% was low in comparison. He went on to say that the service learnt from complaints as detailed in the report including the learning from ombudsman findings. The theme for upheld complaints for this report was delays.

The Chair sought more detail on the complaints in regards to disabled children and whether the significant rise in Members enquires were due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Lee Henley answered that there had been 4 complaints in the disabled children team and 3 of those had been upheld. The learning theme was delays in communicating with parents which the service would be focussing on. In regards to Members enquiries, he said that this was increasing across all council departments but was not Covid related.

The Chair commented that complaints should be encouraged to enable the service to learn from these. Councillor Anderson asked if the service had made changes to processes to reduce the number of delays in complaints. Janet Simon said that there were tracking of complaints and processes in place to ensure complaints were on track. Staff were trained and awareness was raised to ensure people knew about the complaints process. She mentioned that the service also received compliments.

Nicola Cranch queried whether the delays in communicating messages to complainants were due to staff being wary of giving bad news. Janet Simon explained that delays tended to be a result of not being able to reach a family by phone. The service aimed to communicate messages in writing to ensure that a response was provided.

Councillor Akinbohun asked whether future reports could include a comparison of complaints to other neighbouring boroughs. Lee Henley answered that this could be looked at in future reports.

Councillor Watson questioned whether there were any Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and the turnaround times for these. Lee Henley explained that there were FOIs in Children's Services and across the council the council's performance in responding to FOI's was strong with 96% responded to within timeframe. However, FOIs differed to complaints and were not covered in this report. He said that FOI formed part of an Information Governance Report which was covered under the Standards and Audit Committee.

RESOLVED:

That scrutiny committee considered and noted the report.

19. Children's Services Savings - Education and Skills

The report was presented by Michele Lucas.

The Vice-Chair asked what constituted safe and unsafe routes. He also asked if children would still have access to Michele Lucas explained that the service looked at the walking and public transport routes that enabled a child to go safely from their home to school. This involved legal advice to check what was deemed a safe route. For children that were unable to access these routes, individual assessments would be carried out. She firmly stated that the service would not let children travel on unsafe routes.

Councillor Watson mentioned that some children were not able to travel on public transport due to personal and mental health issues. She sought clarification on the service's criteria for vulnerable children. Michele Lucas answered that safe routes were assessed for mainstream schools and that SEND pupils were assessed to identify whether they could access public transport. Where SEND pupils could not, the service would support. She went on to say that there were travel plans in place from schools and parents had approached the service for support in encouraging independence for post-16 SEND pupils. The service would support young people who were not able to access public transport.

The Chair commented that the report was lacking in details and asked what the operating model was and why it had not been brought to scrutiny earlier as the work on this had been ongoing for the past 12 months. She said that a previous work programme meeting had suggested that the report would include organisational charts. She noted that Michele Lucas had mentioned that 12.5 full time equivalent (FTE) places had been removed and sought clarity on this. She said it was hard to scrutinise the changes proposed and the impact of these on education and skills. She commented that the report did not highlight what services were being offered and which ones were a statutory service. She went on to say that the report's recommendation was for noting but felt that the report was serious and commented that paragraph 7 suggested that there would be more reductions to come in the future. She stated that she was not happy to recommend the report or the proposals to Cabinet and that the Committee had not been able to fully assess the proposals before Cabinet in December.

Sheila Murphy explained that different versions of reports went through various checks before a final version was completed which was the version that was before Committee. She said that the 12.5 FTEs were vacancies but could not name the posts due to the current HR process going on. With the operational model, there were no charts to compare the difference as the proposals were still in the consultation stages but these could be presented

once the operating model was confirmed. She explained that every directorate in the Council had a budget gap to close hence Children's Services' proposals in the report. With school effectiveness, most of the duties now lay with academies as the funding no longer came to the Council, therefore Children's Services was looking at how to run their statutory duties more effectively.

With the open vacancies, the Chair questioned whether this had contributed to closing the budget gap and savings in the last financial year. She asked how many vacancies had been held in Education and Skills last year and whether any staff had been put on notice. Sheila Murphy answered that the vacancies may have offset another budget but was not considered savings as it was a post that would still be spent. She explained that holding vacant posts were for redeployment purposes to enable staff at risk of redundancy an opportunity to fill these vacant posts. Staff in Education and Skills were not currently at risk of redundancy.

Councillor Watson sought more detail on the proposed closure of two nurseries in Tilbury in regards to savings and the number of staff currently employed there. She also asked whether placements would be found for the children that was currently attending the nurseries. Sheila Murphy answered that councils no longer managed nurseries and Thurrock was one of the few left that did. She said that there were 33 part time staff in both nurseries and that there would be a saving of around £130,000. She said that placements would be found for children. She went on to say that the service would go through the consultation stage to find a provider to manage each nursery. If there were no providers to take over the nurseries, then the Council would look to closing the nurseries in the summer term next year but the consultation process had not started yet.

Councillor Watson stated that she was not happy with the nurseries closing and that the report was not detailed enough as it was unclear on what the operating model would be. She said that the criteria for vulnerable children needed to be widened. She asked what services would be provided by Children's Services following the reductions. Michele Lucas answered that the operating model would focus on SEND learners and vulnerable children. She explained that the Council's statutory duties included SEND education, educational psychology and support services for education welfare. There would still be some services under education that was funded such as youth and skills. She went on to say that it was the Council's duty to provide nursery placements but not to run nurseries.

The Chair asked whether the 33 part time staff in the nurseries would go if there was no provision found. Councillor Anderson asked whether there were enough placements in the borough for the children in the two nurseries. Sheila Murphy confirmed yes to both questions.

Councillor Snell felt that there was enough detail in the report and pointed out that the Council had a budget deficit. He commented that the service was looking to retain staff and that the Council's statutory duties remained. Councillor Akinbohun sought clarification on the position of the staff members

if another provider was found. Councillor Thandi sought clarification on the funding placements for children. Michele Lucas explained that a negotiation process would take place to ensure that staff were protected and that there was a HR and legal process involved for this. She said that the funding placements followed the child as part of the Early Years scheme.

The Chair proposed a new recommendation which was, 'That the Children's Services O&S Committee recommend that Cabinet does not move forward with these savings which potentially would risk the Council's ability to fulfil its statutory duties.' Councillor Watson seconded this. Councillors Snell, Akinbohun, Anderson and Thandi did not support this new proposed recommendation.

UNRESOLVED:

1.1 That Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the proposals identified to contribute to savings to offset the funding gap.

1.2 This report to this committee seeks specific comment on the relevant items which fall within its remit and which requires further member scrutiny prior to final cabinet decisions being made on the relevant items.

20. Proposed Budget Reductions for Children's Social Care and Early Help

The report was presented by Janet Simon.

Referring to page 50, the Vice-Chair noted the target figure for fostering households and commented that the figure was optimistic and asked why this was the target figure. Janet Simon answered that the impact of Covid had impact on the target figure last year but the service was now looking to recruit new foster households. She said that the figure was optimistic but possible with the recent council tax exemption.

The Chair asked what the current number of foster households were and commented that the target figure was optimistic. She asked for an update in future reports. Janet Simon said that she did not have the current figure on hand but that the service was halfway to the targeted figure. She explained that the proposals in the report was for the next financial year.

Referring to paragraph 3.2, Councillor Watson noted that the Council statutory duties were now rated as Good from the recent Ofsted inspection and asked why the service was changing its services now. She also sought clarification on a relationship approach. Janet Simon explained that the four strategic areas of the service would remain in place and that the plan was to bring services together in house to enable the Council to deliver a more streamlined service from one place. She referred to paragraph 3.10 which detailed the internal and external services provided. This would ensure that families received a complete service. In regards to a relationship approach, Janet

Simon explained that this meant a team that would work closely with a family to deliver a more efficient service and with one point of contact for the family.

The Chair sought clarification on the difference between the operating model and the current structure. She asked why the changes had not taken place two years before. Janet Simon answered that two years ago, the service had other priorities following the Ofsted inspection which included safeguarding children and managing social workers' caseloads. These were now in place and the service was now looking at how services could be enhanced. She stated that the proposals in the report were proposals only and could change through the consultation process.

The Chair asked whether the proposals would expand caseloads for social workers and what was an unacceptable number of caseloads. Officers explained that there were no plans to increase caseloads and that there were spans of control in place before the Ofsted 'Good' rating was given. An acceptable number of caseloads was up to six which would ensure the quality of social work carried out would be good.

The Chair asked what services would be impacted by the proposals and clarity on the number of posts at risk of redundancy. Officers explained that there was a total of 22 posts at risk with a maximum of 13 redundancies. Staff at risk of redundancy would be offered the vacant posts as mentioned in the previous report. None of the posts would impact upon the Council's ability to carry out its statutory duties, spans of control in social work or social workers' caseloads. The posts were in the consultation process and was a combination of posts from qualified and unqualified posts but not from the Early Help Team as it was important this team continued to operate.

Councillor Watson asked how much savings would be made from the proposals and if there were a high number of agency social workers in the service. She commented that there would be savings made from the vacant posts held as the funding for those were still available and could have been used elsewhere in the service. She asked whether there would voluntary redundancies. Officers were unable to confirm how much savings would be made as the proposals were not confirmed yet. The service did not have a high level of agency staff and where there was previously, this was at 15 – 16% which was low for social care. The managers in social care were predominantly permanent. Officers stated that the vacant posts were covered by agency staff or temporary staff and that permanent staff would be offered these posts if they were redeployed. Staff were able to take voluntary redundancy if that was their preferred option.

Councillor Snell sought confirmation that the proposals would not put the Council at risk of performing its statutory duties; would not impact on the children using these services; would not impact upon staff delivering these services; and that the service would continue to operate at a good level. Sheila murphy confirmed yes to all this.

The Chair proposed a new recommendation which was, 'To recommend that Cabinet do not move forward with these savings which would essentially risk the ability of Children's Services to adequately safeguard children and young people.' Councillor Watson seconded this. Councillors Snell, Akinbohun, Anderson and Thandi did not support this new proposed recommendation.

UNRESOLVED:

1.1 That Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the proposals identified to contribute to savings to offset the funding gap.

1.2 This report to this committee seeks specific comment on the relevant items which fall within its remit and which requires further member scrutiny prior to final cabinet decisions being made on the relevant items.

21. Ofsted Focused Visit on children at risk from extra-familial harm 30 June - 1 July 2021

The report was presented by Janet Simon.

The Chair noted the earlier transition planning process for Looked After Children and said well done to the service on this work. In regards to care leavers, she noted that some had to move homes several times in a short period of time. She asked what plans were in place to address this. Janet Simon answered that the Transitions Panel worked with the Council's Housing and Adult Social Care Teams that looked at these issues for young people. These discussions took place before young people reached 18 years old and there were pathway plans in place. This also involved young people in the process to ensure that they were able to manage a tenancy and to identify other housing options if they were not ready such as supported accommodation or staying in their fostering placement. The service also looked at their housing sufficiency to check that the accommodation was right for their young people. She explained that the service had worked on these plans prior to the Ofsted inspection and was now in the process of embedding these. Since the Ofsted inspection, the service was planning to work on some new initiatives with the Adult Social Care Team.

In regards to return home interviews, the Chair asked whether there were ideas in place to engage young people in these. She also asked if Thurrock could learn how other local authorities undertook these interviews. Officers answered that the service was looking at the best ways to engage young people such as through their social worker. There was no data on return home interviews and the service could only compare against other local authorities through what was publically available. However, neighbouring eastern region authorities had similar levels of engagement as well.

RESOLVED:

1.1 That the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the

Ofsted Focus Visit letter and provide comment or challenge in respect of the outcomes.

1.2 That the three areas for improvement identified by Ofsted were considered by the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and support offered to deliver against these recommendations

22. SEND Inspection Outcome - Written Statement of Action Update

Due to the limited time left at the Beehive, the Committee agreed to defer this item to the next scheduled Children's Services O&S meeting on 1 December 2021.

23. Work Programme

An update on the nurseries consultation process would be circulated to Members as a briefing note.

There were no updates to the work programme.

The meeting finished at 9.27 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