

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 8 February 2022 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Sara Muldowney (Chair), Graham Snell (Vice-Chair), Abbie Akinbohun (*arrived 7.04pm*), Alex Anderson, John Kent (substitute) and James Thandi

Councillors Fraser Massey and Sue Sammons

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

Apologies: Councillor Lee Watson
Sally Khawaja, Parent Governor Representative

In attendance: Lucy Boatman, Youth Support Worker
Lauren, Youth Cabinet Representative
Tiffany Bright, Inspire – Skills Manager
Priscilla Bruce-Annan, Local Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP) Business Manager
Jenny Coles, Independent Chairperson & Scrutineer Thurrock LSCP
Kate Kozlova-Boran, Strategic Lead – Employability and Skills
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director Education and Skills
Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director Children's Services
Sarah Williams, Strategic Lead – Education Support Service
Lucy Tricker, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being recorded, with the 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 9.30pm. She explained that if items on the agenda were not concluded by 9.30pm, the meeting would be adjourned and would recommence at the first meeting of next municipal year.

42. Minutes

There minutes of the meeting held on 11 November 2021 and 1 December 2021 were approved as a true and correct record.

43. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business. The briefing note submitted to the Committee regarding the work of Inspire was agreed.

44. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

Councillor Akinbohun arrived at 7.04pm.

45. Youth Cabinet Update

The Youth Cabinet Representative provided their update and explained that they were working on the 'Make Your Mark' challenge, which helped young people with mental health difficulties around Thurrock. She explained that Youth Cabinet were also working with the Education and Wellbeing in Schools Service to develop a questionnaire regarding young people's mental health to ensure the campaigns would be the most effective. She stated that they were also working with Essex Police on the 'Speak Out, Speak Up, Speak Big' campaign to produce a video regarding crime that would be posted on social media as the Youth Cabinet had found that current Essex Police videos aimed at young people had not been engaging. She added that Youth Cabinet were also going into schools to debate and educate young people on hate crime, and were producing a leaflet in partnership with the Hate Crime Officer, which was aimed at 9-13 year olds and would explain hate crime and how to report it.

The Assistant Director Education and Skills questioned how the work of Youth Cabinet and Essex Police could link with schools. The Youth Cabinet Representative explained that Youth Cabinet were engaging in the 'Make your Mark' campaign by promoting the work of Essex Police in schools and making posters. The Chair asked how Youth Cabinet were working to improve engagement between schools and the 'Make your Mark' campaign. The Youth Cabinet Representative replied that the 'Make your Mark' campaign would be promoted on social media and would be discussed within schools. The Chair thanked Youth Cabinet for their hard work throughout the year, and for their continued attendance at Children's O&S Committees.

The Youth Cabinet Representative and Youth Support Worker left the meeting at 7.09pm.

46. Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Partnership: Progress Update on Peer Review & Case Review - Action Plans

The LSCP Business Manager introduced the report and stated that it provided an update on the work of the LSCP and the progress that had been made on action plans. She stated that the Partnership were currently working on updating the service's priorities. She commented that the current priorities included neglect, participation and engagement, and violence and vulnerability. She explained that this work included consulting with frontline practitioners regarding their emerging concerns, and she hoped the new priorities would be agreed by the end of March 2022. She explained that a roundtable meeting had been held in December 2021 regarding the new priorities, and a frontline practitioner questionnaire had been circulated, which

would close on Friday 18 February. She explained that once the feedback had been analysed, the Partnership would then choose the new priorities based on this and other factors, and would work with the Health and Wellbeing Board and Community Safety Partnership to ensure the new priorities would support their ongoing work. She stated that identified priorities for 2022-24 would need to be processed via the LSCP governance processes, but that the Partnership had been working with the Safeguarding Adults Board, the Health and Wellbeing Board, and the Community Safety Partnership to devise and agree a shared priorities document. She explained that the document would be dynamic so that it could be updated as boards and partnerships updated their priorities.

The LSCP Business Manager added that in October 2021 a Children's Social Care conference entitled 'Building Better Connections' had taken place, during which 140 people, including frontline practitioners and Councillors, had discussed the emerging theme of extra-familial harm. She added that the Partnership were also undertaking audits as per their annual audit schedule during which deep dives were conducted into randomly selected cases to ensure the Partnership was performing well, highlighting areas of good practice, and identifying areas that needed additional work. She explained that if certain areas were identified as needing additional work, a re-audit may be undertaken later on in the year to closely monitor the Partnerships progress. She added that the LSCP Business team were collating the Safeguarding in Education audits. She commented that a report was currently being written and any learning would be shared directly with schools and via learning and development events.

The LSCP Business Manager moved on and stated that the LSCP also commissioned a detailed Thematic Review of Serious Youth Violence and Gang Related Violence, which was a result of an incident between two young people. She explained that the LSCP worked with an external reviewer to see what areas had worked well and what lessons could be learnt. She stated that the report regarding this thematic review would be published at the end of February or early March, and multi-agency meetings would be called to discuss the recommendations from this review. She added that the LSCP had also formed a Neglect Sub-Group, which was a multi-agency partnership group to reduce neglect in Thurrock and ensure that a framework was in place to meet this aim. She commented that due to the detailed work of the group, this priority and Sub-Group might be rolled over into the next municipal year.

The LSCP Business Manager stated that the report included RAG rated appendices outlining the work undertaken on case reviews. She explained that the Sam and Kyle Case Review had identified eighteen actions, sixteen of which were now green or blue, and two of which were amber. She stated that the two amber recommendations were currently progressing and the recommended reflective practice sessions had been developed and would run in February, April and June 2022. She stated that these sessions would bring multi-agency practitioners together to discuss complex cases. She moved on and explained that the Frankie Case Review from 2020 had recommended fourteen actions, all of which were green or blue, barring one which was

amber. She stated that the team were working on the amber recommendation which related to children whose parents had received custodial sentences, and the team were currently looking at best practice and how they could do things differently. She stated that the Peer Review was now complete and the Leo Case Review published in February 2021 had eleven completed recommendations and three amber recommendations, which still had ongoing work. She stated that one amber recommendation from this Case Review was to ensure that the Think Families approach was being followed, and Thurrock's LSCP were working with Essex County Council and Southend Borough Council to ensure it was embedded throughout the county. She added that all three authorities had been working together to produce a podcast and additional resources for frontline practitioners, which was available on the LSCP website. She mentioned that Southend, Essex and Thurrock Councils would also be holding a Think Family Summit in the Spring/Summer 2022, and survey with schools was being undertaken in relation to recommendation 1.2 to find out what information they receive. The LSCP Business Manager summarised and stated that the Shae and Ashley Case Review was currently being signed-off through the LSCP governance processes.

The Independent Chairperson and Scrutineer Thurrock LSCP stated that the action plans would be embedded and supported in schools through the ongoing thematic reviews. She added that multi-agency partners would also be looking at all of the relevant records from Serious Case Reviews to ensure a strong framework was implemented. The Chair thanked officers for their report and felt that it had been easy to see the information and had been easy to scrutinise. She queried the timeframe for recommendations from Case Reviews to be implemented. The LSCP Business Manager replied that the development of the recommendations could take time due to data collection, but this differed on a case by case basis. She added that a rapid review was completed immediately after the incident, but the standard turnaround time for a full Case Review was approximately one year. The Corporate Director Children's Services added that the turnaround time for Case Reviews could be delayed due to external processes, for example coroner's investigations and police enquiries, as these had to finish before LSCP Case Reviews could be published. The Independent Chairperson and Scrutineer Thurrock LSCP added that actions would be adopted as soon as possible following an incident, and although it might take time for the final report to be published, recommendations may have been put into place and embedded before publication. The Chair thanked officers for this clarification and asked that all Serious Case Reviews come before the Committee, as it was a standing item on the agenda.

Councillor Anderson felt pleased to see that frontline workers would be included as part of the consultation regarding identifying LSCP priorities for 2022-24, and asked what the target participation levels would be. The LSCP Business Manager replied that the team usually aimed for approximately 50% frontline worker participation.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Noted the update on the work of the LSCP and the progress made on Action Plans to date.

The LSCP Business Manager, and Independent Chairperson and Scrutineer Thurrock LSCP left the meeting at 7.31pm.

47. Verbal Update: Written Statement of Action - Outcome of Re-Visit

The Assistant Director Education and Skills introduced the report and stated that it outlined the recent Ofsted revisit report that would be published on Thursday. She explained that Ofsted had felt that Thurrock had made sufficient progress on all areas since the inspection in 2019, and although there was some further work to be completed, she and the team felt pleased with the report. She explained that she had uploaded all of the relevant Children's O&S reports and appendices to Ofsted, and the Ofsted inspector had reported that these had been useful and had been pleased that O&S had shown a keen interest in the progress of the recommendations. She felt that lots of hard work had gone into the re-visit and many partners had been included. She stated that the team worked hard to ensure the child was always at the centre of the service and the team made a difference in children's lives. The Corporate Director Children's Services added that she had felt it had been a fair report and good things had been achieved by the team. She felt that there were some areas to improve, but lots of hard work had been undertaken so far.

The Chair felt pleased to see that Thurrock had made sufficient progress on all recommendations and that the Committee had been helpful in ensuring this had happened. She thanked officers for their hard work over the past few years and congratulated them on their achievement. Councillor Snell echoed the Chair's comments and thanked the team for their excellent work.

48. Home to School Transport

The Strategic Lead Education Support Service introduced the report and stated that it provided an overview of home to school transport. She explained that Thurrock Council had a statutory duty to ensure children between the ages of 5 and 16, and in some cases young people up to age 25 with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), could get to school. She stated that currently Thurrock Council assisted 1161 pupils get to school, either through contracted bus routes, train ticket reimbursement, or payments to parents for fuel. She stated that the Council were committed to ensuring sustainable home to school travel for children, and the team were currently undertaking a review of school routes, including those that had previously been deemed unsafe.

The Strategic Lead Education Support Service explained that the team were considering introducing travel training for young people in education that had complex SEND needs. She felt that this would help some young people with

SEND become more independent as they would have someone accompanying them on their route to and from school for a minimum of three months, with a view to them completing an assessment and becoming able to travel on their own. She stated that for those children with highly complex needs, for example children attending Beacon Hill Academy, all passenger transport would be retained. She added that the team were also introducing a new IT module that would help support transport providers and contracted route drivers.

The Strategic Lead Education Support Service moved on and explained that although the team were considering all routes to school, no decision had been taken yet, in particular no decision regarding the route from East Tilbury to St Cleres. She explained that the team regularly reviewed and investigated routes to schools and would continue to consider potential alternative options for travel, for example pupils utilising the train service. She stated that no conclusions or decisions had been agreed, but legal advice was being sought to determine which routes had the potential to be made safe. She stated that the team would be talking to parents, Councillors and the school before any decision was made. She explained that currently six buses took children from East Tilbury to St Cleres, and the team would be looking at all safety and capacity aspects, and had undertaken a professional risk assessment. She explained that the eligibility criteria for free home to school transport would remain the same and therefore any child with a low income family, or who lived more than three miles away from their school, would be eligible to apply for free travel.

The Strategic Lead Education Support Service explained that for some post-16 students who would not be able to utilise contracted travel anymore, the travel training programme would be offered, which would help improve their independence. She added that the team were currently working with year 11 students regarding travel training, but this would be lowered so year 9 students would also be able to access the programme. She added that the team were also focussing on sustainable travel, for example pupils utilising bus and train services, which would reduce carbon emissions. She added that the team were also considering introducing personal travel budgets which would be given directly to parents and would allow parents to choose the most suitable transport for their child and would give parents more freedom. She stated that the personal travel budgets would be given directly to parents before the start of term, which would ensure that no parent would be in financial difficulty waiting for reimbursements. She stated that this work would be completed in four to six weeks, and would be ready for introduction by September 2022.

The Strategic Lead Education Support Service added that the team were also recruiting a behaviour support specialist who would support children who had behavioural issues and needed support travelling to and from school. She stated that the specialist would travel with them to school and ensure that their journey was comfortable and not stressful. She summarised and stated that a travel survey had been given to St Cleres in December 2021 to provide an insight into pupils and parents travel patterns and safety, and emphasised

that as there would be no change in policy, the Council did not need to undertake a more formal consultation.

The Chair opened the debate and stated that there were some good proposals contained within the report, such as the travel training programme, but felt concerned regarding other proposals. She questioned the overspend of the home to school transport budget. The Corporate Director Children's Services replied that the service was overspent by approximately £800,000 and the proposal to remove school buses from East Tilbury to St Cleres would save approximately £200,000. She stated that the decision to consider all available routes was to ensure that children travelled to school in the best way, and that currently no routes were being stopped. She added that the team had to be mindful of budget pressures, but the overspend would not be solely saved through travel training or the removal of contracted bus services. She stated that the team would support SEND children to travel differently.

Councillor Kent queried the total budget of the home to school transport team. The Corporate Director Children's Services replied that the approximate budget was in excess of £1million. Councillor Kent felt that £800,000 was a large overspend and queried if a £150,000 savings projection had already been agreed for next years' budget. He also queried what specific COP26 sustainability goals would be met through the home to school transport proposals. He asked how many tonnes of carbon emissions would be saved through the planned removal of the school buses. He felt that a baseline level of carbon emissions data needed to be collected before the team could decide if the removal of the school buses would be environmentally beneficial. The Strategic Lead Education Support Service replied that the team were currently looking into sustainable travel and overall COP26 goals, but that sustainable travel had been an important part of the summit. She stated that the team could look into the baseline air quality figures to determine the impact of the school buses. Councillor Kent moved on and asked if a mode of transport could be deemed as a safe route to school, rather than a physical route. He questioned if the current school bus from East Tilbury to St Cleres had been deemed unsafe. The Strategic Lead Education Support Service stated that a mode of transport, for example buses or trains, could be deemed as a safe route to school. She added that the current contracted bus route had been deemed to be a safe route to school, but other forms of transport such as the walking route, were in the process of being determined safe or unsafe. She added that currently 376 pupils utilised the current bus service between East Tilbury and St Cleres. Councillor Kent asked if children eligible for free transport would be reassessed after the introduction of the new personal transport budget. The Strategic Lead Education and Support Service responded that parents had to reapply for home to school transport on a yearly basis, but applicants would be offered a personal transport budget if appropriate. She emphasised that the same eligibility criteria for free home to school transport would remain. Councillor Kent felt that the travel training programme was a good idea, but questioned why nineteen children had been identified as eligible, eleven had started the programme and only one child had successfully completed it. The Strategic Lead Education Support Service replied that some children could take longer to complete the programme and

the three children listed in the report were still in the process of completing their training. She stated that it could take up to six months for some children to become fully confident travelling independently. Councillor Kent asked if the results from the survey with St Cleres could be shared with the Committee. The Strategic Lead Education and Support Service replied that she would share the results to the Committee, but stated that the main outcomes had been that children did not know their options for safe travel to school. She highlighted that the response rate had been low, and it had mostly been completed by parents rather than children.

Councillor Anderson queried what the benchmark was for eligibility for free travel. The Strategic Lead Education Support Service replied that any parent on income support or whose child attended a school more than three miles away could apply for free home to school transport. Councillor Sammons stated that the majority of children who utilised the bus service from East Tilbury to St Cleres lived more than three miles from the school, so would remain eligible for free transport. She felt that therefore the bus service would need to continue running to ensure children eligible for free transport could get to school. She felt that by removing the contracted buses, emissions would increase as parents would be more likely to drive their children to school, which could equate to an additional three hundred cars on the road. She felt that it would also increase safety concerns near St Cleres as parents would struggle to park. She added that the platform at East Tilbury train station was small, and was often full with children travelling to or from other schools or commuters, and an additional 300 students would increase safety concerns on the platform. The Strategic Lead Education Support Service replied that the team were considering all routes and all options, and were thinking about all potential alternatives.

Councillor Snell echoed comments from Councillor Sammons and felt that the proposed removal of the bus service would increase the number of parents driving their children to school. He asked if the team had considered keeping the bus service but asking children ineligible for free transport to pay. The Strategic Lead Education Support Service replied that every option was being considered and the team would communicate any decisions or proposed decisions to the Committee. Councillor Massey stated that as Ward Councillor for East Tilbury he had concerns regarding the removal of the bus service. He confirmed that no officers had walked the route between East Tilbury and St Cleres and felt that the route in its current state could not be declared safe. He asked if the legal advice being sought from the team was from the Council's internal lawyers or an external law group. The Strategic Lead Education Support Service replied that the team were consulting with the Council's internal legal team and external counsel. Councillor Massey highlighted the government requirements for a safe walking route, and stated that a route needed to have a kerb to be declared safe, and the route between East Tilbury and St Cleres did not have a kerb. The Chair sought clarification that there was only one road from East Tilbury to St Cleres and this road would need to be declared as a safe walking route before the bus service could be cancelled, and the Strategic Lead Education Support Service agreed that this was the case. She added that the decision for a walking route to be

declared safe had to be based in law and the team would look at all options before a decision was made.

The Parent Governor Representative added that by removing contracted transport, attendance and attainment at St Cleres could fall as some parents would not drive their children to school, and some children would not have the motivation to find other alternative routes. She asked if the Council would ensure that the direct travel payment to parents was only used for the intended purpose. The Strategic Lead Education Support Service replied that the team would be working to ensure that the payments would only be used for travel, and were developing a system for this purpose.

Councillor Snell echoed Councillor Massey's comments and stated that the government had outlined the necessary amenities along a road before it could be declared safe. He felt that currently the road did not meet this criteria, for example there were no kerbs, and therefore did not feel that it could be declared safe by the legal team. The Chair agreed with this comment as the road did not have a grass verge or kerb, which meant children would have to travel through farmer's fields, and there was no street lighting or drainage systems. Councillor Sammons added that when the road was being litter picked by the Cleaner and Greener team, traffic management systems had to be implemented and one lane of the road closed to ensure their safety. The Strategic Lead Education Support Service agreed that the current road between East Tilbury and St Cleres could not be declared a safe route in its current state as there was no verge or pathway. She emphasised that the Council would not put children at risk travelling to or from school, and were simply considering all options and alternatives.

Councillor Akinbohun asked if there was any way the route could be made safe as some children and young people preferred walking. Councillor Massey felt that if the route was improved with adequate kerbing and lighting, it could be made safe for children to walk, but it was not safe in its current state. The Strategic Lead Education Support Service replied if there was investment into kerbs or cycle paths along the route that it could be made safe. She explained that this could come in future with the proposed developments in East Tilbury, which would increase the number of houses in the area and improve local infrastructure.

The Chair asked why only one young people had completed the travel training programme. The Assistant Director Education and Skills replied that it had been a challenge to get young people enthused about the scheme. She stated that young people had been excited about the prospect of the scheme, but the team had struggled to get young people to engage once the scheme had been developed and rolled out. She explained that this was why the team had decided to roll the scheme out to younger children, starting in year nine. She added that the Council had also been working closely with parents to better understand how they worked with their child on travel training to build partnership working. She stated that the pandemic had also unsettled parents whose child travelled via public transport to school, and this had made it more difficult to engage. The Chair felt pleased that the scheme was being rolled

out to younger pupils with complex needs. She highlighted that some children with very complex needs would be unable to travel independently even with the scheme in place. Councillor Kent added that the Council had a statutory duty to ensure that children could get to school safely, particularly those children with SEND and complex needs. He felt that any proposed changes should be centred on the child and minimising disruption to young people's educations, by ensuring that SEND children could travel to school in a stress-free environment. The Assistant Director Education and Skills stated that the team worked in partnership with schools and parents to ensure that the child remained at the centre of the service.

The Chair proposed an additional recommendation reading "The Committee agree that the route between East Tilbury and St Cleres School is an unsafe walking route for children." This additional recommendation was agreed unanimously.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Reviewed and commented upon the work undertaken related to Home to School Transport and Post 16 SEND Transport in relation to the areas outlined within this report.

2. Agreed that the route between East Tilbury and St Cleres School is an unsafe walking route for children.

The Strategic Lead Education Support Service, and Councillors Massey and Sammons left the meeting at 8.31pm.

49. Education and Skills Operating Model

The Assistant Director Education and Skills introduced the report and stated that it had been requested by the Committee in October 2021 and outlined the new operating model for the education and skills team. She stated that the Council remained committed to skills training for people aged 0-99, including early years and adult learning. She stated that a review had been undertaken that had helped to realign the work done by the team, particularly since all schools bar one had become academies. She explained that as a new teaching hub had been opened at Harris Academy, some posts within the team had been removed as their function was now undertaken by the schools themselves, including governor development training.

The Assistant Director Education and Skills commented that the Council had also been looking at repetitive tasks, such as data entry, and how this could be effectively streamlined. She explained that the team had therefore merged SEND data systems, and this had been highlighted by Ofsted as good practice. She explained that the nurseries previously run by Thurrock Council were now out to procurement, which would finish in March. She added that recently the team had been focusing on children that were electively home educated (EHE), as following COVID approximately eighteen children had not returned to school for mental health and anxiety reasons. She explained that

these children had all returned to school now, but highlighted that the team were factoring in the impact of COVID when meeting with pupils, particularly those year 11 pupils who would be taking their GCSEs this year.

The Assistant Director Education and Skills explained that the Education Support Service had been streamlined, as it was now under one strategic lead. She added that the Inspire programme was also continuing well, as it attracted significant external funding, and was currently in the middle of a programme regarding young people aged 16-25 that were not in employment, education or training (NEETs). She stated that currently the number of young people whose whereabouts in the system was unknown was zero, thanks to the hard work of the Inspire team. The Assistant Director Education and Skills explained that the adult community college was also under operating under a new model, as they had relocated to the South Essex College building and had mobilised their online learning platforms quickly at the start of the pandemic.

Councillor Anderson asked if the Council made contact with new EHE cases, and if a parent could be deemed unfit for home education. The Assistant Director Education and Skills replied that all EHE parents were met with and RAG rated. She added that if a parent was RAG rated red the team would encourage parents to consider other options for schooling, and would be continually monitored in partnership with the parent. She stated that during COVID the number of EHE parents had significantly increased, and robust processes had been put in place. She stated that there were local forums for EHE parents who supported each other, but EHE was not suitable for all families and routes back into formal education would be provided. Councillor Anderson felt it was good to see that the Council supported EHE as an option for parents, and that it was monitored and parents were engaged with.

The Church of England Representative questioned what measures were put in place to ensure home education was in line with the levels taught in schools and the general curriculum. The Corporate Director Children's Services replied that there was little legislation regarding EHE, but changes to the legislation were a current priority for Ofsted. She explained that statutorily the Council had to undertake one visit per year to an EHE parent, but the team could not insist the parent was teaching the general curriculum. She felt it was a concern, both within Thurrock and nationally, that EHE children were not up to the average attainment levels for their age range. The Strategic Lead Employability and Skills added that the Inspire team worked closely with young people at risk of NEET, and explained that this year the Council had utilised career advisors to work with approximately twenty young people on an individual basis to discuss career advice, mental health and wellbeing.

Councillor Akinbohun questioned if there was a set curriculum for an EHE child. The Corporate Director Children's Services explained that the parent of an EHE child chose what to teach and did not have to follow the curriculum. She added that the parent had to evidence that there was a form of education taking place to EHE officers. The Chair questioned the number of EHCPs within the borough and if this was above the national average. The Assistant

Director Education and Skills replied that there were approximately 1800 children in Thurrock with an EHCP which was above the national average. She stated that the Council closely monitored the level of EHCP requests, particularly in early years' cohorts due to the potential impact of COVID. She stated that the early years' team had been working with children in early years' who were at risk of an EHCP to determine if there was an actual need or if the child was experiencing difficulties due to lack of socialization and learning during the pandemic. The Chair highlighted that case workers under the new model had 150 cases, and questioned what the figure had been before. The Assistant Director Education and Skills replied that under the old model caseworkers had approximately 350 cases, but new staff had been employed under the new model. She explained the number of caseworkers had doubled from five to ten, two new supervisors had been employed, and a new post had been created for a Tribunals Officer, who would also lead on quality assurance. She added that there had also been investment in the Preparing for Adulthood team, which had increased from one to four officers. She stated that these new hires would reduce the stress placed on caseworkers and other colleagues. The Assistant Director Education and Skills added that the overall staffing level had had to be reduced due to budgetary pressures, but no staff had been lost in the SEND team. She stated that staffing levels had been reduced by removing vacant posts and by not filling posts where people had retired.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Scrutinised the operating model outlined in the report and offered support and challenge.

50. Children's Social Care Operating Model

The Corporate Director Children's Services introduced the report and stated that it followed on from the previous report as it reported on savings within the new Children's Services operating model. She explained that the Children's Services team would be operating under the Think Families approach as of 1 April 2022, which would help address demand across the service. She highlighted point 3.2 of the report and stated that the Think Families approach considered the whole family within health and social care, which would help to improve outcomes for children, and build stronger relationships within families. The Corporate Director Children's Services explained that the Think Families approach did not just consider close family, but could also mean neighbours or family friends that were important to the child in question, and would help support parental networks and open broader conversations for struggling families. She explained that if a family were becoming known to Children's Services, the team would ask the families what could be done to assist them and a consultation would begin with parents, family members, and partners such as schools and hospitals.

The Corporate Director Children's Services highlighted point 3.4 of the report and mentioned that learning and feedback from team members had informed the new model and the team had focussed on what the service could deliver

to parents and children. She explained that under the old model Children's Services had had to employ external agencies to undertake child assessments, but this was now being brought in-house and colleagues were undertaking the necessary training to complete these assessments. She added that the Think Families approach would connect families and build relationships that would be beneficial for the child, and would be based at the Oaktree Centre as this was a more inviting environment for children than the Civic Offices. The Corporate Director Children's Services stated that under the old model the team had used the Family Group Conferencing system, whereby staff members had to undertake specific certification for this and the model had to be absolutely applied. She stated that this system had been time intensive as all named individuals had to be met with separately before a group meeting could take place. She explained that under the new operating model, the team would be utilising the Family Group Network approach that had been developed in New Zealand, and ensured the family found their own solutions to problems, with the help of professionals. She stated that this approach empowered families, strengthened networks and was in line with best practice guidance.

The Chair thanked officers for their comprehensive report and felt it was good to see how the new model would affect children and their families. She felt that it was a sensible way of finding cost-saving measures, whilst also enhancing the experience for families. She felt that having colleagues who could assess and help children would improve the experience for children who could then form bonds with their case worker. Councillor Snell echoed the Chair's comments and felt that official meetings were not the most suitable solution for all families in crisis. He highlighted point 3.8 of the report and asked how the Council were going to ensure that men and fathers were attending parenting programmes. The Corporate Director Children's Services replied that officers would work individually with fathers to ensure they attended the necessary programmes. She added that the team were also devising new men only programmes that would be more tailored to the needs of fathers and would hopefully reduce the stigma associated with fathers attending parenting programmes.

Councillor Kent felt pleased to see that the Council were undertaking the Think Families approach. He asked what the impact of reducing caseloads on frontline workers would be, and if there would be a clear line of sight between managers and frontline workers. The Corporate Director Children's Services replied that the Think Families approach would not reduce the role of social workers, who currently had approximately 14-15 cases each. She added that social worker managers had no more than six reports at any one time, which would help to ensure good oversight. She stated that the Think Families approach would only be implemented if there was a low degree of risk to a child. She stated that if a child at risk presented to the Council then they would not be involved in Think Families and would work with a designated social worker.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Received the report.

2. Commented on the contents of the report.

51. Inspire - Head Start Housing: Supporting Care Leavers

The Inspire Skills Manager introduced the report and stated that the Head Start Housing (HSH) programme had been piloted in 2016 and provided care leavers with a tailored approach to housing. She stated that the programme had launched in December 2018 and had outlined the strategy for transitional housing for care leavers, before they entered the private rental or social housing market. She explained that in 2018 there had been 30 beds allocated to HSH for exclusive use by care leavers, and this had been expanded when the Council had purchased an additional three properties that provided an extra twelve beds. She explained that HSH Officers sourced and managed properties, and provided basic furniture and amenities, such as beds, curtains, Wi-Fi and water, and helped care leavers access the Local Council Tax Scheme. She stated that when the report had been written there had been an occupancy rate of 95.56%, but this had now increased and there were currently two rooms available, both of which were undergoing maintenance before they could be re-let.

The Inspire Skills Manager stated that the HSH Strategy had required refreshing in 2021 as the Council currently tried to encourage care leavers to remain in Thurrock, which was not what was best for some young people. She stated that the team were now working to continue to help young people who wanted to move out of the borough, and in the next five years the team would exchange all private rental HSH properties for council stock. She added that the team were also working hard to develop neglected sites across the borough into single bed units, with the possibility of care leavers being involved in the construction and design of these units.

Councillor Kent thanked officers for their hard work on the report and queried the forecasted overspend of the service. He queried if the HSH strategy was sustainable in the medium to long term. The Inspire Skills Manager replied that the spend of the HSH transitional accommodation had increased during COVID, and the current overspend was £900,000. She stated that the commissioning team were working with HSH officers to invite providers to tender to supply housing. She added that there were currently more than 50 beds for care leavers, which cost the Council £156 per bed, per week, which she felt was sustainable for the long term and met current levels of demand. She added that the HSH team would work with colleagues in Children's Social Care and Housing to mitigate any financial issues if they arose. The Corporate Director Children's Social Care added that the £900,000 overspend was a part of the overall Children's Social Care overspend.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Reviewed the cross-directorate working to improve the quality of services to care leavers regarding housing options.

2. Supported and promoted innovative ways to engage children in care and care leavers to prepare for independent living including entry into employment.

52. Work Programme

The Senior Democratic Services Officer stated that under the scrutiny review, any relevant motions that had been agreed at Full Council would be brought before Committee for their oversight. As this was the last meeting of the municipal year, there were no items to add to the Work Programme.

The meeting finished at 9.28 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**