

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 16 June 2022 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Adam Carter (Chair), George Coxshall (Vice-Chair), Alex Anderson, Srikanth Panjala, Graham Snell and Lynn Worrall (Substitute) (substitute for Martin Kerin)

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

Apologies: Kim James, Chief operating Officer, Healthwatch Thurrock
Angela Surrey, Youth Worker, Children's Services
Councillor Kerin

In attendance: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills
Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help
Priscilla Bruce-Annan, Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business Manager
Rhiannon Whiteley, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Jenny Coles, Independent Chairperson & Scutineer Thurrock LSCP

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.

1. Minutes

The minutes of the Children Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 8th February 2022 were approved as a true and correct record of the meeting.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

4. Youth Cabinet Update

A written report was provided.

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

The LSCP Business Manager introduced the report.

The Parent Governor representative asked who had been invited to attend the A Safe Place to Play conference in July 2022.

The LSCP Business Manager confirmed that sports organisations in the Borough had been invited such as sports and dance clubs. Professionals such as the Community Safety Partnership, the LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer) and Essex Police had also been invited to give talks.

Councillor Worrall queried whether incidents of neglect were rising or decreasing and asked what is being done to reduce neglect. Councillor Worrall also asked how the numbers in Thurrock compared to other neighbouring authorities.

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that Child in Need numbers have reduced and in comparison to our statistical neighbours in the region our numbers are comparable and actually slightly below. She confirmed they are doing a lot of work around Early Help and Think Family's service to make sure they are engaging families much earlier to reduce the incidents of neglect. Child Protection numbers remain fairly steady.

Councillor Worrall referred to the Shae and Ashley Local Health Review and noted that 2 of the 14 actions have been completed and asked when all the actions will be completed by.

The LSCP Business Manager confirmed that they are working through the other actions, there are timescales for when an action should be completed by and this is monitored.

Councillor Panjala asked about the number of cases involving violence and vulnerability in Thurrock and asked what is being done to tackle this including through their work with SET (Southend, Essex and Thurrock).

The LSCP Business Manager confirmed she was unable to confirm the numbers of cases at the meeting today however, through their joint work with SET they do discuss the number of cases and they look at what they can do to tackle these issues collectively as well as locally.

Councillor Panjala raised the issue of whether working with neighbourhood watch could help support to reduce crime.

The LSCP Business Manager confirmed that the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership work closely with the Community Safety Partnership who do a lot of work with the neighbourhood watch service and she would be happy to

contact her counterpart in CSP to reach out and do some work with the Neighbourhood watch service too.

The Independent Chairperson & Scrutineer Thurrock LSCP added that in relation to the issue of neglect, early intervention is key to preventing neglect before it gets to the point where a child needs to go on a Child Protection Plan and their partners and health colleagues are also a key part of that. In relation to Child Protection Plan numbers, they are steady and they benchmark in terms of comparison to their statistical neighbours and nationally very well.

Councillor Snell referred to the findings from the National Child Safeguarding Reviews on Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and asked if we are confident that in Thurrock we are doing what these people were not doing.

The LSCP Business Manager confirmed that the LSCP (Local Safeguarding Children Partnership) have considered the reviews of Star Hobson, Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, Child Q in City & Hackney and the Croydon review 'Ben' and they have compiled an action plan of the recommendations. Where an agency is responsible for an area they have been asked to evidence what is currently in place and what additionally needs to be done. Once this information has been returned and collated agencies will be tasked with actions on what needs to be put in place, with identified timescales. This is in its early stages as the documentation went out two weeks ago and the agencies have been given a month to respond.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that they have completed the multi-agency MASH audit and audits with partners from health and education to reassure themselves that decisions being made are timely and that they are considering any safeguarding issues and so far in those audits the outcomes have been good and outstanding. In MASH they have audits fortnightly and a wider audit is completed every other month across the partnership too.

The Corporate Director for Children's Services added that the work the Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help and the LSP have been doing did not happen in those places where the incidents subject to review happened. She confirmed that they are looking at what's happening on the ground, that caseloads are right for the workers and that the right agencies are working with them. They are very open to constantly looking at their practice and having other agencies come in and look at what they are doing and how decisions are made.

Councillor Anderson mentioned the external review into Serious Youth Violence and Gang Related Activity and noted the learning and recommendations would be published in June 2022 and queried whether a verbal update could be provided at the meeting tonight.

The LSCP Business Manager confirmed it is not ready yet, it is in the process of being signed off and should be on their website in the next couple of days.
At 19.27 the LSCP Business Manager left the meeting.

RESOLVED: That the Committee: -

- 1. Note the Partnership priorities for 2022-2024, update on the work of the LSCP and the progress made on Action Plans to date.**

6. The Care Review of Children's Social Care and the National Safeguarding Panel Review of Child Protection

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help introduced the report.

The Chair referred to the Care Review and the recommended investment of £76 million pounds to recruit 9000 more foster carers over 3 years, the Chair noted that Thurrock have already started an ambitious foster care recruitment policy and questioned whether this would affect their targets in any way.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help stated that investment in funding for the recruitment of foster carers is always welcome and explained that the recruitment of foster carers is a national issue. The Review makes recommendations about the use of family members and trying to use them first and she explained that we know children will often drift back to their families as they get older. It is being looked at how kinship carers can get the same support as stranger foster carers. It might be that we can increase our kinship carers alongside our foster carers. The feeling within the report is that lots of people want to be foster carers and if more is done to support them then we will get more foster carers. The remuneration in Thurrock to foster carers is very good, it is reviewed regularly, and it is in line with agency foster carers. Thurrock foster carers council tax is paid and they are supported through supervising social workers and therapists.

Councillor Coxshall referred to the unregulated care placements for under 18's and questioned how many we use in Thurrock currently and how the recommendation to rule out unregulated placements for under 18's will affect Thurrock.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that currently we have two young people in an unregistered placement. It is always a last resort, they are reviewed regularly, Ofsted are informed and increased visits to these placements are completed. The priority is always to place a child in foster care, if this is not possible then they will look at a Residential placement and they will always try creative ways to make a placement work.

The Corporate Director for Children's Services explained that in the Care Review they are suggesting supported accommodation for over 16's will need to be regulated and provide "care". Some older young people don't want to be in a care arrangement and supported accommodation is allowed under the current legislation. Thurrock has quite a few children in supported accommodation and that would be a big shift which would be resource intensive as it would probably mean fees would increase so those placements

can comply with the regulations that Ofsted require and they will probably need more staff. The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help added that some young people would struggle with that level of intensity.

Councillor Panjala queried what is the current position on the recruitment and retention of social workers.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that there is a consistent supply of permanent workers. The majority of managers are permanent. In terms of the social worker work force there are a number of agency workers. Compared to Thurrock's statistical neighbours and nationally the retention rate is pretty good at around 20%. There is a challenge nationally around recruiting and retaining social workers.

Councillor Worrall asked whether kinship carers are paid.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help stated that if Children's social care are making an arrangement for a child to live with a family member then we would complete a reg 24 assessment to make sure it is appropriate and if it is then the kinship carer would be paid a fostering allowance.

The Corporate Director for Children's Services clarified that this would not necessarily be the case if it was a family arrangement.

Councillor Worrall asked whether further funding is expected to be received.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed that in the report the author does state the figure that would be required to make these changes. That figure however is an estimate for what will be required nationally and it is not known what proportion of that Thurrock would receive. Commitment from the Government is required and the Government's response to the review is not known yet.

The Corporate Director for Children's Services confirmed that in the review there are 80 recommendations and there will be fundamental changes to the way they work and for families also. The Government's response is required by the end of the year. The Government may not accept all of the recommendations but they may accept some and some of the changes would require legislative change.

Councillor Anderson referred to the recommended investment of £2bn in family help, he questioned how much funding will be distributed between different Local Authority's and the mechanism for deciding how much each Authority will receive.

The Corporate Director for Children's Services confirmed this is yet to be confirmed but looking at other programmes she suspects there may be trailblazing which is where Local Authority's will bid and say that they can start to deliver a project and funding will then be awarded to them for this. There

will also be some criteria applied around finance which will be applied across the whole country. Thurrock were recently included in the Family Hubs pilot and there is funding that goes with that and it is very much about family support and help. The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help confirmed 75 authorities have been put forward and are eligible for the family hubs £300 million funding over 3 years. It is not known what proportion Thurrock will receive from that yet.

The Corporate Director for Children's Services stated that in the National Safeguarding report they are looking at the introduction of multi-disciplinary teams. The Independent Chairperson & Scrutineer Thurrock LSCP is on the panel and Thurrock would be well placed to pilot some of this.

The Chair commented that the report is very new and the Government will be reviewing it by the end of this year and so hopefully we will get a more complete picture as to how it will affect Thurrock in the New Year.

At 19.45 The Independent Chairperson & Scrutineer Thurrock LSCP left the meeting.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- 1. Are involved in discussing the Review (s) proposals and recommendation and the impact these will have on service delivery over the next few years.**
- 2. Provide challenge and input into the development of the recommendations through the government consultation, and to be involved in the reshaping of children's social care services in the next five years.**

7. Education National Drivers: Schools White Paper, SEND & AP Green Paper, Levelling Up, Skills Act, School Admission and Attendance Guidance

The report was introduced by the Assistant Director for Education and Skills. In relation to the Schools White Paper and the proposed measure that schools will offer a minimum school week of 32.5 hours a week by September 2023, the Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed that having spoken to Schools most of them are already offering this in one way or another already.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills also referred to the proposed measure that by 2030 all schools will be part of a strong multi-academy trust and commented that Thurrock has a number of multi-academy trusts but also has some stand-alone Academy's. The Assistant Director for Education and Skills noted that the stand-alone Academy's are happy in how they currently operate and they are all currently rated as 'Good'. The Assistant Director for

Education and Skills and Corporate Director of Children's Social Care have met with their stand-alone academy schools already and are due to meet with them again in a few weeks to talk them through this.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills Access referred to the plan for funded training for a senior mental health lead, she explained that the School Mental Health Wellbeing Service has been in operation for two and a half years and Thurrock have almost led the way with some of this work. Moving on to the SEND and Alternative Provision Green Paper, the Assistant Director for Education and Skills commented that in her opinion it is positive that SEND and Alternative Provision will be included under one framework as many children in Alternative Provision have got a range of SEND requirements. They announced the framework yesterday and therefore the Assistant Director for Education and Skills has not had the opportunity to go through this yet.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills updated the Committee that they have managed to secure the resources to move forward with the plan for an online portal and hopefully it will create a digital solution for people to review their plans.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills noted in relation to The Skills and Post 16 Education Act Thurrock have been very positive in improving skills development. A possible challenge to ensuring adults have maths skills to progress in career opportunities is that schools are struggling to recruit maths teachers and she therefore confirmed that Thurrock are looking at how they can build capacity locally in this regard.

In relation to the Working together to improve school attendance guidance, the Assistant Director for Education and Skills informed the Committee that they hold fortnightly meetings regarding children who are missing education and confirmed that they are monitoring and tracking those children.

Councillor Coxshall commented that Thurrock should be proud of what they can offer as a skills hub and we should be promoting it. He has seen friends pushed down education pathways and for one friend it has taken him 5 years to get his life back on track.

Councillor Worrall questioned if we go down the route of every school being part of a multi-academy trusts what role will Thurrock Council continue to have?

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed that the Council will have a role as all their schools are already multi-academy trusts and stand-alone academy trusts and they continue to have a large role in working in partnership with them. The Local Authority has a strong role in driving up attainment in schools. Skills is another area where the Local Authority have a key role as they have to submit data to the Government regarding children who are not in education or training. The Local Authority are also responsible for SEND, EHCP plans and Alternative Provisions.

Councillor Worrall queried what the backlog of outstanding schools to be inspected is.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed that we don't have a big backlog. They are finding a lot of the early years providers have gone through Ofsted inspections recently and they have very few providers that are not rated as good or better.

Councillor Worrall requested an update with regard to the recruitment of teachers.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed she regularly meets with the CEO's of the multi-academy trusts and although there was some challenges, this is not something they have raised recently. Recruitment for support staff and learning support assistants is more of a challenge. She confirmed they do have a recruitment and retention group who work with the schools. They have a number of Early Career teachers coming through the system however, retention is a challenge and it cannot be underestimated the challenges teachers have faced over the last two years.

The Church of England Representative referred to the register for children not in school and queried how that is managed as she has had over the past year as a teacher two children from foster care coming into her class from other Local Authority areas, one was on her register for 6 weeks before being moved out of the area again and another one for 8 weeks who is still on her register despite also moving out of the area. She highlighted that it makes her class attendance look poor but also that these children are missing out on weeks of their education and it looks like they are still in her school as they remain on her register.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills clarified that if a Thurrock child moves somewhere else it is the responsibility of the virtual school to look into this and ensure a smooth transition. For those moving into the area the admissions team try to place them in a school nearby.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help explained that where children are looked after they do try and keep them in their own school so they can maintain links with their community and family even if they have moved to another neighbouring borough. If a child is placed miles away then they would have to look at changing their schools.

Councillor Snell commented that he was recently privy to a survey completed by a master's student regarding Newly Qualified Teachers and it asked them about their knowledge around SEND education and he was surprised to learn that a lot of SEND teaching modules are optional and therefore going back to the issue regarding the challenges around provision of SEND training he noted that there are likely to be a lot of teachers who don't have any relevant SEND training.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed that they have discussed this issue with the Harris Academy Teaching Hub and they have completed a lot of work with the SENCO in schools in training and supporting them. They have also looked at what they can offer to teachers too. They have recognised that there is a real challenge in the early years sector in that little ones have lost a lot of early language development opportunities over the last two years such as attending playgroups and they have looked to put in additional training for the early years providers to help with this. Health have also contributed to the training as there has been a significant increase in the number of little children on EHCP plans. They are looking at language delay and what can be done to enable these children to catch-up.

Councillor Snell queried what the Local Inclusion Dashboard is.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed they have a SEND dashboard at the moment but they need to work out how they are going to capture Alternative Provision data into that too. Ofsted did comment when they visited that they had a robust set of data.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills raised in relation to the green paper there is not much written about home to school transport and that is an area that is significantly overspending and in her opinion it is a policy that needs a review. They are pulling together a response to the paper.

Councillor Worrall highlighted that Tilbury is an area of high deprivation and they have lost two nurseries recently and she questioned if there will be enough places for all children in the area to attend nursery as vital skills are learnt at nursery in preparation for school and previously children who didn't attend nursery were holding others back in the infant's schools.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills responded that there are nurseries in that area that have availability and they are working with other providers to see if there is any more availability. Currently the work is being done and the Committee will be updated on the progress of this in the future.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- 1. Recognises the amount of change and amendments to education over the next few years.**
- 2. Provided challenge around how the proposed and new changes to the educational landscape support Thurrock children and young people**

8. Children's Social Care Performance - Quarter 4 2021-22

The report was introduced by the Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help.

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help explained that as a receiving Authority for unaccompanied asylum seeker children Thurrock often has higher levels of care leavers than other Local Authority's as they often come into the system around 16 -17 years old.

Adoption numbers are starting to go up following lots of delays in court proceedings as a result of Covid.

The Chair was pleased to note that the number of children subject to a Child Protection Plan was below our statistical neighbours as well as the national average and thanked the Team.

Councillor Worrall queried the figure that 50.6% of care leavers aged 19-21 were in part or full-time education, employment or training and questioned why 50% of care leavers are not doing any of these.

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help responded that a year ago the number was at 41.4 % as some of the care leavers really struggled through Covid to access education and employment. She confirmed they are being creative to support young people back into education.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills explained that they have panels meeting weekly and staff are contacting them every other day. She stated that the figure is not where they want it to be and she agreed they have a lot of opportunities in Thurrock such as the Prince's Trust and On-track Thurrock Programme but the issue is engaging care leavers. Covid had an impact on this group of young people and a lot of them experienced mental health challenges. She commented that hopefully they will see an increase in these numbers as we come further out of the pandemic.

Councillor Worrall raised the issue of housing for young people and asked what work is being done with the local plan and highlighted that young people cannot go on the housing list if living with their parents or a responsible person.

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed that they are heavily involved with colleagues in housing to identify units to support care leavers. They currently come into the 'Head Start' housing scheme and they get them ready for a tenancy. She explained that you can't just put a young person in a property without the support around it. She assured members that they are involved in the local plan.

The Corporate Director for Children's Services stated that the Youth Cabinet are also involved in the local plan.

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help explained that when looking at housing for care leavers they try to make the plans so that it is the right housing at the right time. Some young people want to stay at home so if they are in foster care that might mean a staying put arrangement. Not every person is ready to live on their own at 18.

Councillor Worrall queried if a foster child went to university could they return to their foster placement in Thurrock when they want to come home.

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help stated that in respect of a staying put arrangement both the foster carer and the child must agree to it. If the child is going to a university far away they will be supported to return to their foster placement in the holidays and they will fund this. It is expected that a young person from Thurrock who wanted to return to Thurrock after completing university would be housed in Thurrock.

Councillor Coxshall queried the number of foster placements over 20 miles away.

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help explained that they do always try to place children close to home and within 20 miles. Recently they had a large sibling group that couldn't all be placed in the same placement but they wanted them to be in placements close together so they could have carers who could work together to preserve the sibling relationships and in this instance the placements were over 20 miles away. She noted this was not the only reason to explain the figures but an example of why this was decision was made in this case.

Councillor Snell commented that overall this is a good news story and we should be proud of this. Officers have done well to get these figures going back in the right direction and he thanked them for their hard work.

The Chair echoed Councillor Snell's comments.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- 1. Reviewed the areas of improvement in Children's Social Care and work undertaken to date to manage demand for statutory social care services.**

9. Work Programme

Nothing was added to the work programme.

The meeting finished at 8.37 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