

PUBLIC Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9 February 2016 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors James Halden (Chair) and Andrew Roast (substitute for Susan Little)

Apologies: Councillors Yash Gupta (MBE) (Vice-Chair), Leslie Gamester, Martin Kerin and Susan Little

Patricia Wilson, Roman Catholic Church Representative

In attendance: Reverend Canon Darren Barlow, Church of England Representative
Myra Potter, Parent Governor Representative
Saania Ali, Youth Cabinet Representative
Sonny Tipping, Youth Cabinet Representative,
David Archibald, Interim Director of Children's Services
Andrew Carter, Head of Children's Social Care
Roger Edwardson, Interim Strategic Leader School Improvement, Learning and Skills
Frances Leddra, Strategic Lead, Safeguarding, Complex Care and Social Work
Michele Lucas, Interim Strategic Leader, Learning & Skills
Malcolm Taylor, Strategic Lead - Learner Support
Stephanie Cox, 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.

48. Minutes

The Minutes of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 19 January 2016, were approved as a correct record.

49. Items of Urgent Business

There were no urgent items of business.

The Chair updated the Committee regarding recent coverage concerning Palmer's College in light of an Ofsted inspection which indicated that students were not making the progress that would have otherwise been expected. He reported that this did not make Palmer's College a bad college but it did suggest that there were problems; as a result officers were due to meet with colleagues from the College to see if any support could be provided and it was agreed that the outcomes from this meeting would be reported back to the Committee at a later date.

The Chair further advised that the Committee would be moving into exempt session for the final item on the agenda, 'Learning from the Serious Case Review of "Megan"', as a precaution so to protect the identity of the individual concerned, however he hoped to ensure that the process was as fully transparent as possible by publishing a redacted audio recording in order to demonstrate how the Council and its partners were being held to account.

50. Declaration of Interests

Reverend Barlow declared a non-pecuniary interest in the general business of the meeting as his wife was a teacher at Thameside Primary School and he had children attending the Grays Convent School and Palmer's College. He was also Vice-Chair of the William Palmer Trust.

Myra Potter declared a non-pecuniary interest in the general business of the meeting as she was a member of staff at Palmer's College and had children attending Little Thurrock Primary School.

51. Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board

There were no matters raised for discussion by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board.

The Chair informed the Committee that this item had been included as a standing item on the agenda for each meeting so that the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Board could refer a matter or cause for concern without delay for consideration.

52. Troubled Families Programme

The Head of Children's Social Care introduced the report which provided an update on the progress and performance of Thurrock's expanded Troubled Families Programme that aimed to assist 1160 more families by May 2020.

Councillor Roast queried how the target figure of 1160 families was determined and whether this was the maximum that could be offered support. In response the Head of Children's Social Care explained that the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) set the minimum target figure of 1160 families for the scheme to be deemed a success, but that more could be assisted above and beyond that number.

The Committee were advised that during Phase 1 of the Troubled Families Programme Thurrock had exceed their target and helped to turn around the lives of more families.

Reverend Barlow highlighted that such cases were not easy to turnaround and that many families would require ongoing support to ensure that any positive progress made was sustainable in the long-term and expressed concern that the programme could become a simple tick-box exercise.

Members were assured that each case was reviewed by the Troubled Families Board and calculations made as to how long support was offered and what outcomes could be demonstrated in real terms. It was reported that Phase 1 of the Troubled Families Programme had only finished in May 2015 so that there still was further work to be undertaken in order to examine long term effects.

Councillor Halden observed that the scheme was clearly working but questioned how much money had been saved and how this compared to other local authorities, to which Members were advised that £1.3 million had been recharged and Thurrock was the only authority that had completed early in the eastern region.

Councillor Halden further questioned whether this work could be traded with other local authorities in order to generate income, in response the Head of Children's Social Care explained that this would be difficult as each local authority faced different issues and it was important that Thurrock focused on succeeding itself in order to maximise the payment by results benefits, although Phase 2 did offer more flexibility regarding traded services.

Reverend Barlow observed that he was uneasy regarding the payment by results aspect of the scheme and questioned whether this was a help or a hindrance to officers.

In response, the Head of Children's Social Care explained that he felt that the payment by results aspect of the scheme was a help as officers were required to evidence success, which had been something that previously the local authority had not been good at. He added that Thurrock had learnt a lot from the data set model used by the Troubled Families Programme and that officers were now looking at where the model could be better used across other services.

Councillor Halden requested that an update be provided to the Committee once the cost calculator was completed so that Members could be assured that an existing service was not simply being repackaged.

RESOLVED:

That the committee scrutinise the work completed on the Troubled Families programme and acknowledge the impact the programme has had on turning around the lives of children and adults in Thurrock.

53. Children's Mental Health

The Strategic Lead for Learner Support introduced the report which provided an overview of the current mental health needs of local children and the young people's population and set out the work of the commissioned service that aimed to improve access to a wide range of jointly funded specialist support with a focus on the most vulnerable children and young people.

Councillor Halden queried whether members of the Youth Cabinet were aware of the work that the Council was undertaking with partners in relation to improving Children's Mental Health.

The Youth Cabinet Representatives set out a number of projects the Youth Cabinet were undertaking in relation to Children and Young People's mental health which included the production of a video to raise awareness, and that NELFT (North East London NHS Foundation Trust) had hosted a number of good events; however were unaware of any other specific projects being delivered by the local authority.

The Committee were advised that the design and the delivery of the service was taking a less clinical focused approach and that a consultation had been undertaken with young people as part of the commissioning process.

Councillor Roast queried how Thurrock compared to other local authorities in terms of percentage of Children's Mental Health need, to which the Strategic Lead for Learner Support explained that Thurrock was broadly in line with regional averages however he would confirm the detail and report back to Members outside of the meeting.

Reverend Barlow questioned whether there was a variation in support offered between grant maintained schools and academies and was advised that academies commissioned varying types of support but that further assistance was provided to all schools through the Strategic Partnership group and Safeguarding Needs Forum.

Councillor Halden asked for clarification regarding the referral approach as he felt that young people did not always find it easy to discuss problems with School Councillors or GP's.

Members were advised that different access routes and a communication plan were in place with NELFT as it was recognised an informal approach and support among peers could be of benefit to those seeking help.

Councillor Halden praised the chaplaincy service offered at Gable Hall School.

The Youth Cabinet Representatives explained that Youth Cabinet had produced a video to raise awareness of mental health issues and of peer support networks. They were keen to explore further opportunities Youth Cabinet could help support Child and Young Person's Mental Health issues.

The Chair and Strategic Lead for Learner Support advised that they would be happy to attend a meeting of Youth Cabinet in order to explore a range of creative ways further support could be offered to young people.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That members receive further reports once data is available to enable scrutiny of the delivery of the new service offer with a focus on those groups most at risk.**
- 2. That member's note that the Corporate Parenting Committee will also receive reports on the access to support and services by looked after children.**

54. Cultural Entitlement - An update on the Trailblazer Programme

The Interim Strategic Leader for School Improvement, Learning and Skills introduced the report which set out the work of the Royal Opera House (ROH) in increasing the participation of Thurrock's children and young people as part of a cultural entitlement.

A publication by the Royal Opera House Bridge entitled 'The Paths We Take, Royal Opera House Bridge 2012 to 2015 and beyond' was tabled at the meeting which further demonstrated the good work that had been undertaken.

The Parent Governor Representative felt that schools adopted different approaches with publicising the programme and engaged with the cultural entitlement offer with varying success, and further remarked that in her own experience one school had been significantly more proactive than another in promoting school holiday programmes and events.

The Committee were informed that 28 out of a total of 52 Thurrock schools participated in the programme but that Head Teacher involvement and Senior Management team support was critical to success.

Councillor Halden commended the positive work but explained that he had hoped to see more evidence of strong cultural heritage, and was concerned that some children still did not have access to such cultural opportunities due to varying personal circumstances. He questioned how progress was monitored to ensure that all schools made the very best effort for young people.

Officers advised that the Royal Opera House facilitated the work of a range of cultural providers but affirmed that more could always be done to improve publicity.

Councillor Roast asked whether the programme was relevant to children's day nurseries and whether this could be rolled out to them. The Interim Strategic Leader for School Improvement, Learning and Skills acknowledged that he was unsure if the cultural offer could apply to nursery and pre-school settings but he welcomed the idea and stated that he would investigate and report back outside of the meeting.

Reverend Barlow queried what could be done differently to engage with the other 24 schools in order to get them on board with the programme. In response officers explained that they wanted a cultural champion in every school, or a cluster of schools, and to increase partnership working between schools.

It was further reported that the Cultural Entitlement Programme further built upon the work of the Committee in relation to Supporting Pathways into Work for Young People as successful apprenticeships had been delivered through the programme.

A Youth Cabinet Representative outlined the work that he had undertaken in offering apprenticeship advice for young people, some of whom had applied to the Royal Opera House for an apprenticeship.

The Committee were advised that story festival activities would be repeated through the Village Beach event.

The Chair proposed a new recommendation, which requested that officers obtain further information from Royal Opera House regarding the schools that had not been engaged with the programme and to determine the profile of children and young people who currently participated in activities so that further outreach could be undertaken with those who were under-represented.

The Committee indicated their agreement to the new recommendation, as they sought assurances that every effort was being made to improve outreach.

RESOLVED:

- 1. The Committee endorse the work of the Royal Opera House and encourage all Thurrock schools to participate in the challenge.**
- 2. As part of this cultural entitlement, the Committee is asked to explore new opportunities to secure funding from sponsors to widen access to arts and culture across the borough.**
- 3. That officers be instructed to seek more information from Royal Opera House regarding the schools which had not bought into the Cultural Programme and to establish the profile of children and young people who were currently engaged so that further work could be undertaken to improve outreach.**

55. Alternative Delivery Model for the Thurrock Youth Offer

The Interim Strategic Leader, Learning & Skills introduced the report which proposed the development of 'Inspire', the Youth Trust, as a staff mutual in order to respond to and take advantage of funding and partnership opportunities as a means to address social-economic, health and educational inequalities facing the young people of Thurrock.

The Committee were advised that financial due diligence had been undertaken, which was detailed in a previous report during the autumn, and that a business plan had been developed in conjunction with the Cabinet Office.

Councillor Halden observed that despite his initial scepticism regarding governance, he was comforted by the governance structure that was now in place but asked for assurances regarding the Shadow Body and whether they would be taking ownership of the legal questions raised in the report. In response the Interim Strategic Leader for Learning & Skills confirmed that the Shadow Body would be taking ownership of the legal questions which had been highlighted.

Reverend Barlow remarked that the report highlighted the benefits of the approach but questioned whether any drawbacks had been identified.

In response officers explained that some of the challenges had been the time constraints and capacity to deliver within a finite budget without missing income-generating opportunities, as other local authorities had been in contact to ask Thurrock to help deliver services.

The Chair remarked that he would be willing to attend a meeting of Cabinet to support the proposal for the alternative delivery model.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorse the recommendation to Cabinet on the development of 'Inspire', the Youth Trust, as a staff mutual having noted the opportunities and risks.**
- 2. That members endorse the recommendation to Cabinet to agree the stages outlined in this report and note that a commissioning report will be referred back to Cabinet for agreement as per current procurement regulations.**
- 3. That members note the recommendations to be made to Cabinet with regard to the provision to award a contract to a new mutual for three years in line with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015.**
- 4. That it be agreed regular monitoring reports be referred to the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee as appropriate as a part of the ongoing governance of the project.**

56. Work Programme

The Senior Democratic Services Officer advised that the Admissions Forum report would be removed from the work programme as the forum had been disbanded some time ago.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be agreed, subject to the change detailed above.

57. Exclusion of Public and Press

The Chair advised all those present that due to the fact that this particular case was still active, unlike previous cases such as “Julia” which had been closed, it was important to respect and retain the anonymity of the individual concerned and therefore recommended that the item move into exempt session.

Members agreed to exclude the press and public for the remainder of the meeting during the consideration of the next agenda item, ‘Learning from the Serious Case Review “Megan”’ on the grounds that information could reveal the identity of an individual under paragraph 2 as specified in Part I of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

RESOLVED:

That the press and public be excluded from the remainder of the meeting on the grounds that the item involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as specified in Part I of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, paragraph 2 on the grounds that information was likely to reveal the identity of an individual.

At 8.05 pm the meeting moved into exempt session and the Chair requested that members of the Public, Press and Youth Cabinet Representatives leave the meeting room during consideration of the next item.

58. EXEMPT - Learning from the Serious Case Review "Megan"

The Head of Children’s Social Care firstly apologised on behalf of David Peplow, Independent Chair of the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Board (LSCB), who was unable to attend the meeting to present the report on behalf of the board.

The Head of Children’s Social Care introduced the report of Thurrock Local Safeguarding Board (LSCB), which set out the nature of the Serious Case Review covering the period from 2008 to 2013 and the reasons why the Serious Case Review was undertaken.

The Committee were advised that the Serious Case Review challenged agencies to look at their practices, such as how they were working together to deliver a coordinated approach, and questioned whether the persons involved had taken on board the history of the case rather than adopt what was referred to as a “start again” syndrome each time a referral was made.

It was noted that the Local Safeguarding Children's Board conference in 2014 focused on neglect and an adolescent toolkit had been developed in an attempt to challenge the misconception that adolescent teenagers were able to help themselves and remove themselves from the situation.

The Head of Children's Social Care assured Members that the landscape was now very different but recognised there was still learning to be done and that Social Workers and Professionals were currently piloting the NSPCC's (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) Graded Care Profile 2 in order to better assess care and identify neglect.

Particular reference was made to the process that had been undertaken for the Serious Case Review, that the publication had been delayed in order to further investigate medical evidence, and the matter had been referred to an Independent Risk Assessor as there were concerns that the young person could be identified from the report.

Councillor Halden expressed concern that despite multi-referrals no quality checks were made to determine whether any referrals had a tangible impact.

During the debate Members queried whether the persons involved in the failures of the case had any professional conduct action taken against them as a consequence, to which officers explained that the agency Social Worker involved had been referred to the professional body, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), for review; however those staff from other agencies and partners were subject to their own professional codes of conduct and it was the responsibility of those agencies to progress this matter in accordance with their own policies and procedures.

It was recognised that the purpose of the Serious Case Review was not to apportion blame but to identify learning to ensure that a similar case could not happen again, however Members requested that the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) ask colleagues and partners to share information that could be disclosed regarding any outcomes of professional conduct action taken so that the Committee could be assured that those involved were held accountable.

Reverend Barlow recognised that whilst the report was that of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board and not of the Council, and as a result officers may not be best placed to answer, he highlighted that despite an apparent catalogue of failings such little change had been enacted and queried how aware the persons involved would have been of the detailed timeline of the case and what safeguards were in place for parents who wished to home educate.

A discussion took place regarding the issue of home elective education and the ability to establish a link to safeguarding concerns. Members expressed concern that a decision to home educate could result in a child receiving little or no education over a significant period of time, with no apparent checks and balances, and that it could effectively remove a vulnerable young person out

of the education system which could otherwise help to identify safeguarding concerns. It was felt that robust oversight was required to determine whether it was appropriate for those children and young people who had safeguarding concerns to be permitted to receive home education.

During the discussion officers made particular reference to the following key points:

- That legislatively parents had a right to educate their children at home and there were limitations on what actions the Local Authority could take unless there were suitable grounds to investigate matters further due to safeguarding concern, which had not been prevalent at the time in this case.
- That there were now procedures in place regarding elective home education and safeguarding issues.
- That arrangements for monitoring children had been tightened significantly and increased awareness of risks.
- That it was recognised the school could have provided more effective challenge and escalated the matter to Senior Management.

Councillor Halden observed that if legislative routes had been exhausted there were other options to escalate the matter further, such as through a judicial process.

A brief discussion took place on criminal action for child neglect cases, and in what circumstances would it be most appropriate, and legal, to take such action.

Councillor S. Little arrived at the meeting at 9.10 pm and was permitted to observe by the Chair.

Reverend Barlow asked the Head of Children's Social Care whether he felt the service was adequately funded and resourced, to which it was explained that there was adequate funding available but significant budget pressures at the present time based on the level of demand, however that the level of demand was changeable. Members were advised that there was a good Early Offer of Help service but it was important to continually monitor the level of caseloads; it was reported that the service had seen an increase in the number of adolescents entering the care system which had put additional pressure on budgets.

The Chair indicated that it was not standard practice for Serious Case Reviews to be referred to the Committee, however he felt that it was important that Members had the opportunity to scrutinise any action plan. As a result he proposed the following actions to be taken, which were agreed by the Committee:

- That the action plan from the Serious Case Review of “Megan” be referred to the Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration.
- That the Head of Children’s Social Care to work with the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board in order to ask partners whether any professional standards action had been taken against the persons involved in the case.
- That in light of the Committee’s concerns regarding the oversight of elective home education for those children and young people who were at risk of safeguarding issues, it be agreed that the Chair write to the Chief Executive to make her aware of such concerns.
- That officer’s be instructed to establish whether the Council needed to invest in digitising archives, in response to the fact that the LSCB had difficulty in obtaining information about referrals.

The Interim Strategic Leader for School Improvement, Learning and Skills advised the Committee that when parents moved into the Borough they were under no legal obligation to inform the local authority that they had children of school age.

In response the Chair suggested that this matter should be explored along with admission arrangements by the Admissions Manager, Colin Jones.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee consider and comment upon the report.

The meeting finished at 9.20 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**