

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 19 January 2016 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors James Halden (Chair), Yash Gupta (MBE) (Vice-Chair), Leslie Gamester and Susan Little

Apologies: Councillor Martin Kerin

In attendance: Reverend Canon Darren Barlow, Church of England Representative
Patricia Wilson, Roman Catholic Church Representative
Myra Potter, Parent Governor Representative
Saania Ali, Youth Cabinet Representative
David Peplow, Independent Chair of Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board
Andrea Valentine, HealthWatch Representative
Carmel Littleton, Director of Children's Services
Andrew Carter, Head of Children's Social Care
Ian Wake, Director of Public Health
Ceri Armstrong, Strategy Officer
Colin Jones, Admissions Manager
Laura Last, Senior Finance Officer – Management Accounts
Michelle Lucas, Learning and Skills Manager
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.

36. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Kerin.

The Committee were informed that Ms. Sanders, Parent Governor Representative had resigned as a Co-Opted Member of the Committee.

37. Minutes

The Minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 10 November 2015 at Gable Hall School, were approved as a correct record.

Councillor Gupta commended the head teacher involvement and welcomed the meeting held at Gable Hall School despite his initial apprehensions.

38. Items of Urgent Business

There were no urgent items of business.

39. 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.

Councillor S. Little declared a non-pecuniary interest in the general business of the meeting as her husband was 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.

The Chair took the opportunity to thank the Director of Children's Services, Carmel Littleton, as she was soon to be leaving employment at the Council, for all her hard work. He explained that she was held in very high regard from her colleagues and Elected Members and presented a bouquet of flowers as a token of appreciation on behalf of the Committee.

Councillor Gupta affirmed he wholeheartedly supported the comments of the Chair and added that Carmel Littleton had improved relationships with head teachers across the Borough and raised educational attainment in Thurrock.

Councillor S. Little echoed the comments raised and expressed her personal thanks to Carmel Littleton, who she felt had been a real asset to the authority.

Reverend Barlow thanked Carmel Littleton on behalf of Schools, Governors and Children across the Borough as she had been a brilliant asset to the authority and always approachable in her work.

In response Carmel Littleton thanked Committee Members for their kind words and observed that Thurrock had a bright future.

40. Fees and Charges 2016/17

The Senior Finance Officer briefly introduced the report and advised that the full Fees and Charges document would be referred to Cabinet for a decision in February 2016, following feedback from all six Overview and Scrutiny Committees which would be included within the report.

Councillor J. Halden observed that increased fees and charges were set out within the report for Grangewaters Outdoor Education Centre, which was soon to be commissioned outside of the Council and staff transferred across to the organisation under TUPE, the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations. He questioned whether the staff affected had been

consulted and were in agreement with the proposed fees and charges, to which the Learning and Skills Manager provided assurances that the proposed fees and charges had been set in consultation with affected staff and that a benchmarking exercise in the competitive market had been undertaken.

Councillor Gupta highlighted that initial concerns regarding library fines totalling odd amounts, such as 11 pence had been resolved, and welcomed the fact that all fines were now rounded up or down to make for easier cash transactions.

RESOLVED:

That the committee consider the proposed charges as detailed in the appendix.

41. Julia - Serious Case Review Action Plan Update, dated 7/1/2016

The Head of Children's Social Care introduced the report which provided an update on the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB), multi-agency action plan in relation to the 'Julia' serious case review.

The Committee were advised that some action points for partners were attributed 'orange' status but that latest updates had not yet been received and therefore it was likely that some of these action points would in fact be categorised as 'green' or 'purple' and consequently on track. It was anticipated that further updates would be provided through the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) and a fully updated document referred back to the Committee in due course.

Councillor Gamester observed that certain issues were reoccurring as 'amber' and asked if there was any way of ensuring that these were on track and 'green' promptly.

At 7.20 pm Reverend Barlow left the meeting.

Councillor Halden explained that he was comforted that the social services team understood what the problem was and have taken action accordingly but expressed concerns regarding whether lessons had been learnt from partners such as the Probation Service, Basildon Hospital and GP's.

David Peplow, Independent Chair of Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board, highlighted that Essex Police continued to face challenges but that the LSCB worked hard to communicate with all partners to receive updates.

A brief discussion took place on the problems that may affect the Police, whether behaviour had become entrenched, or if the value of partnership working had been lost sight of.

Members were informed of the good partnership working with GP's through the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub and that Senior Managers regularly attended GP surgery meetings which fostered closer working relationships.

The Committee were in agreement that partners should have better responsiveness to providing updates through the LSCB on such an important issue and the LSCB should undertake further work to drive this forward as a priority.

Councillor Halden highlighted that professionals should be aware of procedures, such as, that although the Mental Capacity Act and informed consent are relevant to young people between 16 and 18 years, this should not prevent the sharing of information in relation to neglect under the 'paramountcy' principle and queried the progress made against this action point.

In response, the Head of Children's Social Care explained that it was a target of Basildon and Thurrock University Hospital for 95% of front line staff to undertake Level 3 mandatory Safeguarding Children training, but an update was required as to progress against this target and alternative proposals for the remaining 5% of staff.

Councillor Halden further queried to what extent safeguarding functions were being communicated to individual GP's, to which it was explained that GP's had undertaken learning and training to develop advocacy.

Councillor Gupta expressed concern that safeguarding functions could be overlooked by GP's due to the nature of their busy workload and queried whether there was a nominated lead to drive forward change and ensure high standards in safeguarding.

The Committee were advised that much partnership work had been undertaken with GP's, and that there was a designated GP Safeguarding Lead who acted as a source of advice and means of consultation.

The Independent Chair of Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board summarised the good work that had been undertaken by the local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) in engaging with GP's and that a number of initiatives had been developed which included taking conferences out to GP surgeries directly.

Councillor Halden asked for further explanation as to what action was taken against the individuals involved in the case of 'Julia'. In response the Head of Children's Social Care stated that no action was required against individual Police Officers, and in the case of the Social Worker the matter was referred to the professional body for determination, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).

Councillor Gamester was concerned that partners had failed to take appropriate action, which officers felt was not the case but that a fully updated report was needed to assure Committee Members.

Mrs Wilson felt that the matter should be prioritised and that partners should attend meetings to ensure reliability and consistency.

The Chair reaffirmed that partners should do more to provide timely updates and proposed that a new recommendation be added to highlight this as a priority, following which an updated report could be circulated and referred to the Committee as appropriate. The Committee agreed to this proposal.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee continues to monitor progress against the multi-agency action plan with a particular focus on Children's Services.**
- 2. That partners be contacted and requested to provide updates to the action plan as appropriate as a matter of priority, following which a fully updated document to be circulated and referred back to the Committee for consideration.**

42. Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board Annual Report 2014-2015

David Peplow, the Independent Chair of Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board, introduced the annual report for 2014-15, and in doing so set out some of the key achievements and highlights, which included:

- Learning from the publication of the Serious Case Review “Julia”, as the previous review had been undertaken in 2008 and much had changed since.
- Policy development and refresh of the Pan Essex Child Protection Procedures
- The development of the Early Offer of Help and a member of the project board, in addition to the development and support of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)
- Strengthened links with Youth Cabinet
- Positive community engagement through the ‘Big Lunch’ and ‘Tilbury Family Fest’ events.

The Chair thanked David Peplow for the comprehensive report.

Councillor S. Little was concerned that only 3 schools had provided feedback, which was not wholly positive, and queried whether greater engagement was needed. She also questioned whether enough was being done to address their concerns.

The Committee were advised that engagement work was ongoing and the questions surveyed had been to ask what the challenges were, rather than

positive feedback and it was highlighted that the reporting period only covered the first six months of the operation of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub; therefore responses were likely to be greater during the next reporting period.

Mrs Wilson expressed concern that complainants may not be informed of the action taken, which officers felt was an isolated issue as communication was continually reviewed to inform all parties involved of the outcome.

Councillor Gupta commended the detailed report and asked how far parents were aware of the work of the LSCB.

The Independent Chair of Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Board highlighted that much work had been done regarding community engagement at various community events throughout the year, in addition to safeguarding promotional items and messages through Social Media.

Members were informed that much work had been undertaken regarding 'Prevent' training through the Community Safety Board, including briefing sessions for Elected Members, Head Teachers and Staff, although Councillor S. Little felt that school and parent governors should also be offered training or briefing sessions.

Myra Potter questioned whether Thurrock had higher rates of Mental Ill Health, in response it was explained that Thurrock did not have a particularly higher prevalence but there were emotional and attachment needs. The Committee were advised that a report on Mental Ill Health was being referred to the next meeting and strategies regarding reducing self-harm, depression and suicide were set out within the Suicide Prevention Strategy.

Councillor Halden felt that Elected Members could assist the LSCB in contacting schools and inviting feedback on surveys and recognised that there was a data system pilot being undertaken by Southend Borough Council which could provide learning for the future.

Councillor Halden further reported that to assist such work the LSCB should be offered a standing update item on the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee agenda, in much the same way as HealthWatch on the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, so that any concerns or areas that Members could help with could be identified as appropriate. Members agreed to this suggestion.

RESOLVED:

- 1. The Committee note progress made on children's safeguarding for the 12 month period April 2014 to March 2015.**
- 2. That the Committee provide comment on the report.**

3. **That a standing Local Safeguarding Children Board item be included on the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee agenda so that feedback could be provided as appropriate.**

43. Children's Social Care Complaints and Representations Annual Report 2014/15

The Head of Children's Social Care introduced the report which set out the number of representations received during the period of 1 April 2014 – 31 March 2015, including the number of complaints, key issues arising from complaints and overall learning and improvement activity for the department.

The Committee were advised that fewer complaints had been escalated to Stage 1 and that providing advocacy support was important to ensure that children and young people had a voice.

Andrea Valentine, HealthWatch representative, highlighted that the Voluntary Sector worked with the local authority before complaints escalated to Stage 1.

Councillor S. Little expressed concerns regarding the categorisation of 'concerns' and 'complaints' and felt that the classification of complaints as 'concerns' could in turn misleadingly affect the statistics.

The Head of Children's Social Care explained the differences between 'concerns' and 'complaints', which was determined by the complainant and dependent on the gravity of the issue.

Councillor Gupta echoed the concerns raised that the concern/complaint system had been devised to reduce the overall number of complaints and questioned whether the complainant thought they were making a complaint but could in fact be logged as a concern.

The Committee were advised that the complainant themselves dictated whether their issue was logged as a complaint or a concern, and that concerns were normally less serious in nature and did not require escalation.

Members were informed that the Children and Families Assessment team by nature of their work were expected to receive a higher number of complaints due to the fact that they were the first point of contact with a family at the height of a crisis when intervention was often not wanted, whereas other service areas had a greater opportunity to build relationships.

Councillor S. Little queried the sliding scale of payment awarded and questioned how much financial remuneration had been granted. In response the Head of Children's Social Care advised that the service followed guidance from the Local Government Ombudsman regarding the level of payment which should be awarded and stated that he would confirm the total figure of financial remuneration granted during the year 2014/15, and a comparison to previous years, outside of the meeting.

Councillor Halden was concerned that the number of complaints upheld and partially upheld had increased from the previous year and questioned how the Council was getting things wrong, as it was unclear from the report whether the upheld and partially upheld complaints were in relation to small administrative errors or were of a more serious nature. He further queried whether the 4 complaints that were upheld were complaints regarding the same team, as this would be a cause for concern.

The Head of Children's Social Care reported that the complaints were not significant issues that had triggered a serious case review and provided assurances that a particular team were not over represented in the number of complaints received. He further explained that the data could be further analysed and presented to Members in order to demonstrate the categorisation and nature of the upheld and particularly upheld complaints.

Councillor Halden highlighted the response times for stage 1 complaints and asked for assurances that those response times that exceeded the stated timescale were not in breach of statutory guidelines, to which it was explained that the complainant was contacted by the Complaints Officer and asked if additional time for a response could be permitted for more serious complaints that required greater investigation, and that this practice was not outside the boundaries of the law.

The Committee felt that the report set out many examples of compliments in detail but none of the complaints, and that in the next reporting year text should also be provided to further illustrate the nature of complaints.

Councillor Gamester was concerned that complainants may complain in an attempt to only seek financial recompense, to which it was assured that very few complainants were offered financial remuneration and any vexatious complaints identified.

Councillor S. Little expressed her disappointment that only 20 survey responses were received from the sample of 60 children.

The Head of Children's Social Care acknowledged that this was a disappointing figure but that more information on participation rates could be circulated to Committee Members as this information had been earlier referred to the Corporate Parenting Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee consider and scrutinise the report.

44. Thurrock Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2016-2019

The Strategy Officer introduced the report which set out the rationale for the refresh of Thurrock's Health and Wellbeing Strategy, the case for change, the proposed area of focus and the draft priorities for the refreshed strategy.

Members were advised that the focus of the strategy was on prevention and early intervention which included wider determinants of health such as improving educational attainment and tackling child poverty.

The Director of Public Health set out the draft five priorities in further detail and the accompanying goals and action plans for each.

At 9.12 pm Mrs Patricia Wilson left the meeting.

At 9.14 pm the Chair suspended procedure rule 11.1 to allow the meeting to continue beyond the 2 ½ hour time limit until the close of business.

Councillor Gupta highlighted that prevention was more important than treatment and welcomed the importance placed on prevention in the Strategy. He felt that more resources should be directed to prevention strategies and that schools and parents should be supported.

Councillor S. Little observed that many people had been in attendance at a recent meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Board, and felt that the membership of the Board was becoming too unwieldy as it was increasingly difficult to manage the discussion and enable decision making.

Councillor S. Little further reported concerns regarding the lack of parenting classes available, the problem of legal highs such as laughing gas with children and young people and cheap imported cigarettes which negatively affected the health of residents.

At 9.25 pm Councillor Gupta left the meeting.

The Director of Public Health highlighted that the last meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Board had been an exceptional circumstance as more people had been invited to consider the revised Health and Wellbeing Strategy, however acknowledged that Membership of the Board should be reviewed. He added that legal highs were a Public Protection issue and that further discussions needed to take place with colleagues.

Councillor Halden commended the Strategy and the fact that a link had been established between bullying and depression but felt that addressing generational issues and systemic long term issues should be prioritised rather than the formation of short term strategies.

The Director of Public Health agreed that attitudes were passed on through the generations but felt that it was important to combine 'quick wins' with longer-term goals, so that money could be released and reinvested in other areas.

Councillor Gamester echoed the sentiments raised and felt that there were particularly systemic issues around unhealthy eating and the increasing number of fast food shops as well as gambling.

RESOLVED:

- 1. The Committee comment on the refreshed Strategy's proposed priorities and areas of focus as part of the engagement process;**
- 2. That a final draft of the Strategy be referred to the Committee by briefing note prior to sign off by Council in March 2016; and**
- 3. The Committee note progress made on the development of the refreshed Strategy.**

45. School Admissions and Catchment Areas

The Admissions Manager introduced the report which explored the implications for the use of catchment areas in school admission arrangements.

In introducing the report the Admissions Manager explained that in addition to the Council website which provided comprehensive information to parents, briefing sessions were also offered in order to clarify the admissions process and help to ease potential anxiety.

Myra Potter, Parent Governor Representative, expressed concern regarding catchment areas which were historically understood to limit choice and asked for further clarification regarding the admissions process.

In response the Admissions Manager explained that in accordance with statutory guidance any parent could apply for any school place at any time, enabling parents to have greater choice.

Members were advised of some of the difficulties in pupil place planning as the situation each year was dynamic and some of the myths regarding admission strategies.

Councillor S. Little highlighted that she had not been aware that briefing sessions were available for parents and felt that this information would have been beneficial when advising constituents, to which the Admissions Manager confirmed that all Members would be briefed appropriately once the dates for this year's sessions were agreed.

Councillor Halden welcomed the report and was pleased to see that it was not an effort to impose catchment areas on schools. He added that many parents had misconceptions regarding the school admissions process and that advice and support needed to be provided to assist them.

Councillor Halden further observed that there were other publicity avenues to be explored, such as closer working with the Debt Collection Team which held good data on those entering the Borough, and the possibility of including information in the statutory Council Tax notifications.

The Committee were advised that an informative briefing paper for Members of Parliament (MP's) had been released which addressed a number of popular misconceptions and that this could also be of benefit.

A brief discussion took place regarding the timing of the parents briefing sessions as there was some concern these could clash with school open events. Members were advised that all head teachers were informed of the date of the briefing event and schools were encouraged not to schedule open events on the same evenings to enable greater parent choice.

In relation to recommendation 1, the Chair encouraged consultation with every school in Thurrock as each area had different demographic need.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That head teachers' views are sought on current arrangements for admissions and that any significant issues arising are brought back to Committee.**
- 2. That further information and publicity is given to ensure that admission arrangements are clearly understood.**

46. Care Leavers into Employment, Education or Training (EET)

The Strategic Lead for Learning and Skills introduced the report which set out the approach to improve the number of Care leavers in Education Employment and Training to enable them to access the regeneration opportunities in Thurrock. The Committee were advised that Portfolio Holders and Shadow Portfolio Holders had recently undertaken visits to find out more about this work.

Councillor S. Little, as Shadow Portfolio Holder, explained that she had recently participated in a visit and highlighted that she found this to be beneficial. She felt that the Duke of Edinburgh Award and courses offered through Essex Fire and Rescue Service were positive for Care Leavers as they taught valuable skills, and was concerned that these could cease due to funding challenges.

Councillor S. Little further suggested that the Planning department should take into account the needs of Care Leavers when determining Planning applications and considering Section 106 agreements for large scale housing developments, and that a small proportion of properties should be allocated to Care Leavers.

Members were advised that the Fire Service did face funding challenges which affected their ability to deliver the courses, however the Council had submitted a number of applications for funding and was pending a decision which if successful would enable some training opportunities to be commissioned.

The Head of Children's Social Care explained that the service worked closely with the housing team to offer support to Care Leavers but that further discussion would need to be had with the Planning department regarding the use of Section 106 money.

Councillor S. Little queried how many gifted Care Leavers there were and what support was provided, to which the Director of Children's Services explained that there were 11 Care Leavers currently studying at University.

Councillor Halden felt that the Council should offer more support to Care Leavers through the apprenticeship scheme, but expressed concern over the use of the term 'positive discrimination.'

The Committee welcomed the fact that the Council looked to Care Leavers to fill apprenticeship opportunities if they were ready to do so, and that pathway plans were devised during Care Leavers exit interviews in order to secure good employment and training opportunities.

Councillor S. Little observed that every Committee had a duty to consider the impact of decision making on Looked After Children and that this ethos should be encouraged.

The Chair welcomed the report but proposed an amendment to recommendation 1.2, to which the Committee agreed, that enabled discussions among Members to be taken offline prior to reporting to Cabinet.

RESOLVED:

- 1. To support the development of the programme to enable care leavers to take up ambitious opportunities to take part in education, employment or training.**
- 2. That it be agreed Committee Members discuss any suggestions for change that may enhance outcomes for care leavers with other Members outside of the meeting and liaise with the Strategic Lead for Learning and Skills in order to make recommendations to Cabinet as appropriate.**
- 3. To recommend the activities continue to be delivered by representatives across the Council, as well as making use of external agencies/services.**

47. Work Programme

The Senior Democratic Services Officer advised that the budget item had been removed from the Work Programme for February at the request of the Head of Corporate Finance and therefore the printed Work Programme in the agenda was the most up-to-date.

The Committee requested that a budget update item be removed from the Work Programme for March 2016 as the budget would have been agreed by this time.

The Chair indicated that he was happy the Serious Case Review update report due in February was exempt and to be placed at the end of the agenda so that the public and press did not have to be excluded for the majority of the meeting.

The Chair advised the Committee that he had agreed to host a public meeting regarding nursery places in East Tilbury in order to foster negotiations and address concerns.

The Chair added that he understood the letters received in response to the Serious Crime Review had been circulated to Members of the Committee and explained that since this time he had received a further letter which he asked the Senior Democratic Services Officer to remind him to circulate to Members.

The Chair further reported that he had agreed to hold informal meetings with partners, such as the NHS and Essex Police, in order to take a less fragmented approach to Youth Crime. He advised that James Waud, Strategic Lead for the Youth Offending Service would be leading on this work.

The Committee agreed that a report due in March 2016 regarding Supporting Parents into Work be expanded to include Child Poverty, on the recommendation of the Learning and Skills Manager, as the two subjects were closely interlinked.

RESOLVED:

That the Work Programme be agreed, subject to the changes detailed above.

The meeting finished at 10.10 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