

Briefing note to Middlesbrough children and young people's learning scrutiny panel

Monday 17 February 2020

Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency (MVDA) exists to provide infrastructure support to Middlesbrough's voluntary and community sector (VCS). There are a vast range of voluntary and community sector organisations and grass-roots community groups (VCOs) which support children, young people and families. MVDA currently have 104 VCOs listed in its children and young people's VCS forum. There are also numerous VCOs directly responding to the issue of poverty in our communities that are supporting families and not listed as a children and young people's support organisation. Therefore, the number of VCOs responding to the issue of poverty in families is significant.

Following the request from Middlesbrough's scrutiny panel for evidence from the VCS, MVDA issued a request to members of the children and young people's VCS forum to provide information for the panel. MVDA were able to invite three organisations; Linx Youth Work project, Middlesbrough Football Club Foundation and Grandparents Plus, to share specific information about the impact of poverty on learning of the children and young people they work with. In addition, information has been received from Genesis Project in Grove Hill and Together Middlesbrough & Cleveland (this information is provided separately). Other than these, due to capacity and because of the timescales available to us, MVDA has not been able to collate any detailed information or evidence-based practice from the VCS for today's panel. MVDA would be happy to work with the sector to provide this for the panel at a later date. It is worth noting that much of the impact of the VCS on the issues being considered by this panel are implicit rather than explicit, most of the identified VCOs do not exist to respond to poverty directly rather, they have found themselves doing so in response to the current socio-economic climate in which they operate and this will mean that collation of the practice and evidence requested will require support from MVDA.

MVDA have become increasingly aware of the escalating impact of poverty on children and families in recent years; most notably, austerity and increasing levels of poverty within working households has had a significant impact upon children, young people and families with consequential impacts upon children and young people's capacity for learning and educational achievement. Further, this poverty has also impacted the way in which the VCS operates. In recent years the VCS has experienced a significant increase in demand for its services and a reduction in public sector funding alongside increasing competition for any funding that is available from a range of sources. In response, MVDA has seen a stark rise in the emergence of grass-roots community level groups and community activists responding to poverty, for example food banks, clothing banks, school uniform provision, community cafes, provision of meals, especially to children in school holidays, and sanitary product provision. A number of VCOs can provide anecdotal

information which builds a picture of the impact of poverty on children and young people's capacity for engaging and participation with their services, most of which do not exist to respond to poverty. Basic needs for food, clothing and a safe environment is currently a routine response from many VCOs which must be addressed before a child or young person can engage with organisations and projects. Amanda Buck of Breckon Hill Community Centre told us that before she can engage young people in her youth provision, she needs to feed them first. Amanda stated that the impact upon their attention levels and behaviour is significant when responding to hunger is addressed as a priority.

There are a range of VCOs supporting children and young people experiencing poverty and removing barriers to learning. The scope of the work they are doing is wide-ranging. As highlighted, MVDA would require more time to collate more detailed information. An overview of the scope of this includes:

Together Middlesbrough and Cleveland who are co-ordinating work across churches to address food poverty and child hunger (Foodbanks and Feast of Fun).

The Junction who are working with young people as carers of siblings or adults in their life. Their support includes building resilience and mental health in young people living in complex and stressful environments.

Grandparents Plus and a range of kinship care community support groups who support families living in kinship arrangements. (significant research on poverty has been undertaken by these groups).

Middlesbrough & Stockton Mind supporting young people's mental health/emotional wellbeing.

Linx were involved in a research project with Youth Focus North East and Teesside University in 2018-19. They identified a wide range of issues at home, including poverty and home environment that impacted on learning and school attendance.

Barnardos are supporting young people identified as particularly vulnerable to or having experienced sexual harm and exploitation, many of whom have experienced extreme levels of poverty in their home circumstances.

Harbour specialise in supporting those having experienced domestic abuse and offer a refuge for escaping domestic abuse and specialist children's work. The nature of a family fleeing domestic abuse highlights significant poverty issues and the physical and emotional impact upon learning and development.

Safe in Tees Valley, NACRO, Tees Valley Sports and Linx are all supporting young people on the edge of the criminal justice system, school excluded young people and those with support needs.

ACTES provide bespoke mentoring support to young people in the west Middlesbrough area.