

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SOCIAL CARE AND SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL**

**A meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel was held on 14 September 2020.**

**PRESENT:** Councillor Garvey (Chair), Councillor Dodds (Vice Chair); Councillors: Cooke, Cooper (substitute for Councillor Saunders), Hill, Uddin, J Walker and Wilson.

**OFFICERS:** V Banks, C Breheny, R Brown, S Butcher, C Cannon, S Davidson, J Dixon, K Dargue, T Dunn, G Earl, R Farnham, C Kemp, G Moore and A Richardson.

**APOLOGIES** for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Saunders and Wright.

**\*\* DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

There were no Declarations of Interest made by Members at this point in the meeting.

**MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel held on 20 July 2020 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

**INTRODUCTION TO NEW SCRUTINY TOPIC – SUFFICIENCY AND PERMANENCY (PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN CARE)**

S Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services was in attendance at the meeting, accompanied by Directors and Heads of Service from Children's Services, to provide the Panel with an introduction to its new scrutiny topic – Sufficiency and Permanency (Perceptions of Children in Care).

The Executive Director had submitted a report setting the scene for a case study based on a fictitious family which aimed to promote discussion amongst the Panel. The case study, presented by the various Directors and Heads of Service focussed on the children's journeys and pathways through care - from the point of coming to the attention of the Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH), the front door of Children's Services, to becoming a Care Leaver.

In this instance the family comprised of Mum, Dad and three Children – Adrian, aged 14, Bella, aged 6 and Carmen, aged 6 months, living in the Newport area of Middlesbrough. Mum was known to be suffering with post-natal depression since the birth of Carmen and Dad was facing redundancy from his low-paid role due to the economic effects of Covid. Adrian enjoyed limited contact with his birth father and his attendance at school was 54% just prior to lockdown. Adrian went missing overnight on a regular basis. Bella had a disability which was exacerbated by the family's damp living conditions but enjoyed being back at school following lockdown. Carmen was a delightful baby but did not sleep well at night.

The report highlighted that the presentation would refer to children achieving permanence – or moving to their 'forever homes'; to the sufficiency of placements - both the number and type of placements for children in Middlesbrough's care; and the work taking place to improve practice in both areas.

The Panel was advised that permanency could be achieved in several ways:-

- Adoption: A court order. Parental responsibility was removed from birth parents and transferred to the adoptive parents.
- Special Guardianship Order: A court order. Birth parents shared parental responsibility with a Special Guardian. The Special Guardian's parental responsibility carried greater weight than that of the birth parents.

- Child Arrangement Order: An order that stated where a child would live and who they could spend time with or have contact with. The decisions were made in the best interests of each individual child.
- Long term fostering: A child was placed permanently with foster carers. Invariably the child was subject to a Care Order. The birth parents retained parental responsibility along with the local authority. The local authority's parental responsibility carried greater weight than that of the birth parents. The foster carers did not have parental responsibility.
- Long term Residential: A young person was placed permanently in a children's home. The young person may be subject to a care order as above or 'section 20' where the birth parents had parental responsibility but the local authority did not.
- Returning Home/Staying Home: A child or young person returned home where it was safe to do so or was able to stay home with birth parents.

Paragraph 2.2 of the submitted report made reference to the Ofsted findings following an inspection of Middlesbrough's Children's Services in November/December 2019:-

- 'Early permanence is not prioritised for children in Middlesbrough and there is a lack of parallel planning which creates delay in achieving stability'. (Para 15).
- 'The lack of parallel planning creates delay for most children in achieving permanence'. (Para 14).
- Delays in achieving permanence are not sufficiently challenged by Independent Reviewing Officers' (Para 19).
- 'Some children, including very young children, have experienced too many changes in placement before their permanent placement is identified. (Para 23).
- Children experience significant delay in securing permanence through adoption. Currently there are not enough adopters for children who are waiting' (Para 25).

In relation to the sufficiency of placements, the Ofsted report further stated:-

- 'The large number of older children and adolescents in care has reduced placement choice. (Para 14).

The issue was around whether Middlesbrough had a sufficient number of placements, or access to such placements, to meet the needs of children and young people in Middlesbrough's care, and, if not what was being done to meet their needs.

Paragraph 2.4 of the submitted report provided details of the improvement work that was ongoing, including the revision of Middlesbrough's Sufficiency Strategy and Permanence Strategy, together with the development of an overarching Corporate Parenting Strategy. This work would be informed by the voice of children and young people in Middlesbrough.

The Directors and Heads of Service led the Panel through the case study of a child's pathway through care, as follows:-

- Multi Agency Children's Hub (MACH)

A Richardson, Head of Assessment and MACH, explained that a Health Visitor had made an initial referral to the MACH in respect of the family. The Team Manager, or two Assistant Team Managers, screened the referral considering the Internal Threshold of Need Document. This would determine, whether the referral was progressed to Early Help or Children's Social Care. If the referral was clearly an Early Help case, it would be directed immediately to the Early Help Practitioner based within the MACH.

If the referral met the threshold of need for Children's Social Care, it would be screened further and given a RAG rating before being allocated to a screening Social Worker who would clarify any gaps/seek further information with the referrer.

Following screening by the Social Worker, the case would be examined by the Team Manager to review the decision. This provided a further checkpoint to ensure that the case had been allocated correctly and in accordance with the threshold of need document.

- Early Help

G Earl, Head of Prevention, explained the process that was followed once a decision had been made in the MACH to refer the case to Early Help. The case would be allocated to an Early Help Practitioner who would work with the family to complete a 'My Family Plan'. The parents and each child would be involved in completing the My Family Plan and consideration would be given to what services may need to be involved to help the family. Direct work was undertaken with each child within the household to establish what life was like for them on a daily basis.

In this particular case study, support would be sought for Mum to help with her issues around mental health and depression. In respect of Dad, support would be sought from DWP Advisers to provide guidance and advice around benefits and job seeking. An employee of Thirteen Housing was based within the Early Help service and they would engage with the family to look at what help they could offer in relation to their housing issues.

Early Help would work closely with Adrian's school to try to establish the reasons for his poor attendance and to assess whether he was at risk due to his going missing episodes.

An Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) would be created for Bella and consideration would be given as to whether an assessment from a Social Worker within the Disabilities Team was required.

In terms of Carmen, an introduction to the Children's Centre would be provided with information on accessing universal services such as baby play.

All professionals involved would meet around every eight weeks to review progress and discuss any concerns and ensure support was in place around the whole family. Where it was felt that Early Help was not working and the family required additional support to that being offered, it may be necessary to step the family up to the Assessment Service.

- Assessment Service

The Panel was informed that once a decision had been made to step up a case from Early Help, the priority would be to see the children in the household within 24 hours, to ascertain whether there was a child protection issue, or within 72 hours where there was a Child in Need issue. A single assessment was then undertaken which could take between 10 – 45 days depending upon the level of need. During the assessment, everyone within the household was spoken to, including direct work undertaken with children.

Social Workers undertaking the assessments used a 'tool box' in order to work with children in an age-appropriate and variety of ways, including drawing, playing games, taking them to the park, etc to help put them at ease so that they an overview of daily life within the household could be obtained. This was done over the course of several visits in order to build up a relationship with the child.

The Social Worker produced a genogram with the family and an 'ecomap' showing their support network (extended family, friends etc). Sometimes a Family Group Conference (FGC) was held bringing everyone together to look at ways they might be able to support the family. It was acknowledged that one of the issues highlighted in the Ofsted inspection finding was that more should be done to include 'absent fathers' in this process.

Each child had an individual assessment completed which would include safety plans and Covid planning. The Assessing Social Worker would consult with other colleagues where appropriate, depending on need. For example, in Bella's case, liaison with the Children with Disabilities Team would take place to ascertain whether she was entitled to their support. If it was considered this was the case, Bella would transfer to that Team in a planned way.

Once the assessment was completed, the Social Worker would make a recommendation. This could be to: 1) step down to Early Help; 2) conclude that the child was a 'Child in Need' and hand over to Social Workers; 3) conclude the case was a child protection matter. A Child Protection strategy meeting would be held initially to transfer the case to the Safeguarding Team for intervention. The only other outcome from a single assessment would be to take No Further Action.

- Safeguarding and Care Planning

R Farnham, Interim Director of Children's Care advised Members that if the single assessment deemed that further work was required around safeguarding, the case would transition to the Safeguarding and Care Planning Service.

Cases that transferred to this Team could be supported under Section 17 of the Children's Act and offer support around Mum's mental health, Dad's unemployment and the needs of the children. The children could also be supported under Section 47 of the Act where there were child protection concerns. In such cases a multi-agency Child Protection Conference would be held and the children would be made subject to a Child Protection Plan. The Plan would be in respect of each individual child and focus on each child's day to day life. This would differ between the baby, young child and teenager. Improvement would be measured and monitored within set timescales with regular reviews.

Where it was considered necessary, cases could be stepped up to a Public Law Outline (PLO) legal framework meeting to consider the local authority's duties when thinking about taking a case to Court to obtain a Care Order in respect of a child. This would be used for long term fostering, residential care, etc. The Team would work with the family to avoid care proceedings, however, if the children were unable to remain safe in the care of the parents, the authority would examine whether they could live safely with another family member or friend, known as a connected persons placement. In this case consideration would be given as to whether Adrian's birth father would be able and suitable to care for him.

- Youth Offending Service/Vulnerable, Exploited, Missing, Trafficked (VEMT)

K Dargue, Head of the Youth Offending Service, explained when her service may become involved in terms of Adrian as it was known he was frequently missing from home, which had happened increasingly overnight. He had been arrested by the Police and this was placing more stress on the family.

Adrian would have been brought to the attention of the Youth Offending Service following his arrest. A separate assessment would then need to be undertaken in respect of Adrian and the outcome would depend on the help that was offered.

It was highlighted that Youth Offending worked closely with Children's Social Care and followed joint procedures and assessments.

In terms of missing episodes, the Service received daily information from the Police and these were given a risk management rating of low, medium or high. A 'Missing' Team Manager was located within the MACH and screened cases received into the MACH on a daily basis alongside the Early Help Practitioner.

Every missing young person was offered a Return Home interview which would be shared with the child's Social Worker and aimed to build up a picture around the young person. Where a young person was repeatedly missing, this would be discussed at the VEMT multi-agency Forum, which examined issues around exploitation and shared information with partners. Additional support would be provided where appropriate. In the case of Adrian, possibilities such as trying to engage him in support provided by Middlesbrough Football Club Foundation would be explored. Children who were missing from education were also discussed at VEMT.

In addition, all young people in VEMT were assessed and considered by the Risk Management Group. This group was Chaired by the Executive Director of Children's Services and considered those young people where very significant concerns existed and those considered

to be at high risk of death. The Executive Director added that she took responsibility for the young people being discussed at this group and that they had been invited to attend and give their views as to whether they agreed that they should be discussed at such a high level and to tell the group about the issues they faced.

- SEND/Children with Disabilities

The scenario now focussed on Bella who was known to have cerebral palsy and her condition had worsened due to living in damp housing conditions. Bella had an existing EHCP (Education Health and Care Plan). If she were to transfer to the Children with Disabilities Team, there would be a specialist overview from that team.

C Cannon, Head of SEND/CwD explained that Bella would be known to the SEND Assessment Team as she had an EHCP in place. It was possible that there could be significant challenges to Bella's health needs throughout the Covid pandemic and that she may require additional health or social care support, for example, short breaks.

The Executive Director stressed the importance of working together and examples of this had been demonstrated within the MACH, child protection conferences, risk management group, SEND and Children with Disabilities Team.

In the worst case scenario, the interventions explored so far had not worked and all three children had become looked after. The authority was now looking at all three children living away from home permanently.

- Looked After Children and Corporate Parenting

The Director of Children's Care advised Members that once a decision had been made to remove children from the birth family, the Looked After Children and Corporate Parenting service would endeavour to identify forever homes for the children that would meet their needs on a long term basis. At this point all decision making was required to be thorough and robust assessments were needed.

This could be achieved through placing children with: connected persons carers (extended family members or close friends); Special Guardians; long term foster carers; long term residential provision. Long term residential provision was not a preferred option and was only used where a child had very complex needs.

This Team worked closely with the children and birth parents. In this scenario, Adrian's birth father would be assessed to ascertain whether he would be a suitable carer for Adrian, should he wish to care for him. The Team would need to consider whether all three children should be placed together. The preference would always be to keep siblings together unless there was a justified reason for separating them. The Team worked closely with the Independent Reviewing Officer and CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) who provided support to the children and birth parents throughout care proceedings. Children's Social Care would make a recommendation in relation to the plan for the children but it was the Court that made the ultimate decision.

Care planning needed to be timely and robust and the Independent Reviewing Officer had an important role to play.

It was essential for the Looked After Children Team to physically see children on a regular basis and to see them alone to undertake direct work with them. This helped to build a stable relationship with professionals in order for them to protect children and promote their welfare. The Social Worker would always promote independent advocacy for the children and this was particularly important for older children.

Good corporate parenting would also include ensuring that children had good physical and emotional health as the process could be traumatic for many children.

In relation to Adrian and his possible risk-taking behaviour, the Team would work closely with the Youth Offending/VEMT team and aim to improve Adrian's ability to keep himself safe.

The Team would also ensure that the children had good access to education and learning and would work closely with the Access to Education and Virtual School Teams in this regard.

The Team was responsible for finding a forever home for the children where they could remain together, if this was in the best interests of the children. Prospective carers would be carefully assessed in a timely way with a suitable match being made as swiftly as possible.

It was highlighted that Ofsted had identified that children had not been moved to their forever homes quickly enough and that there had been delays particularly in the Safeguarding and Care Planning Service. Work was being done to improve this.

- Residential, Fostering and Futures for Families

The Executive Director stated that, collectively, the local authority and its Members currently were responsible as corporate parents for 690 children. In this scenario, Adrian would be referred to Middlesbrough's new service, Futures for Families, prior to becoming looked after. Futures for Families went 'live' last week and was an edge of care service working with young people to prevent them from being taken into care. The Department for Education (DfE) had provided funding for Middlesbrough to develop the service, based on North Yorkshire's 'No Wrong Door' model. It provided a whole system approach with a multi-agency team and a residential component to support young people and their families.

Should Futures for Families not work for Adrian, given his circumstances, it was decided his needs would be best met with a residential children's home placement.

It was explained that Middlesbrough had some in-house residential provision but that it often had to be purchased from a private sector provider. There were currently 74 Middlesbrough children in external residential placements and whilst some were local, some were as far away as Reading and Devon. In terms of the in-house residential provision, this included a respite offer at Gleneagles for children with a disability. It was acknowledged that some young people had been in residential care for too long because of delays and because foster homes could not be identified in a timely way and this was not ideal.

- Access to Education

T Dunn, Head of Access to Education, explained that he was responsible for several teams within Access to Education, including the Virtual School and School Exclusions and Children Missing from Education.

The Officers within these teams looked closely at these issues on a continual basis and worked closely with all schools, including senior leaders, SENCOs, designated teachers and safeguarding leads. This communication took place daily in order to pool intelligence on children. Where children were permanently excluded from school the team ensured that legal processes were followed correctly and that schools were compliant.

Where children and/or families went missing, the Team worked with the Police, Home Office and Benefit Agencies to track them down. Where families returned to a foreign country they could be difficult to track.

For looked after children, the Virtual School ensured they received good educational provision. It was clarified that the Virtual School was not a physical building, but it ensured that the 690 children in care received appropriate education.

- Virtual School

V Banks, Head of the Virtual School explained that all looked after children were part of the Virtual School and that the same information was kept in relation to those children as if they all attended the same school. This was a legal responsibility.

In this scenario, Adrian would be in Year 9 and the team would make contact with the Designated Teacher at Adrian's school to inform them that Adrian had become looked after and there would be a requirement to develop a Personal Education Plan (PEP). The PEP would link into any existing EHCP and become part of the child's Care Plan. The Virtual School would work closely with everyone involved with the child, for example, in Adrian's case, foster carers, VEMT/Youth Offending in respect of missing episodes or youth offending involvement and Children Missing from Education. When a child initially came into care, the Virtual School team would try to gain an understanding of the child's education history. For example, Adrian's school attendance was currently 54%. The Team would try to look at the reasons why it was 54%. What had gone wrong and how could he be supported? When did it start? The Team would personally speak to Adrian to try and find out why and put a robust plan in place to increase his attendance. Very often working directly with the young people themselves was the best way of identifying issues and resolving them and by subsequently working closely with the school.

In terms of Bella, a PEP would be developed within 10 days of coming into care. Bella already had an EHCP so the PEP would need to identify the gaps in the child's learning, what interventions were required, who would be accountable for them and how they would be measured. An EHCP had similar targets and outcomes and it needed to be integral to the PEP but not repeated. The Virtual School would work closely with the SEND Team to pull everything together. Since coming into care, Bella's needs would have changed, therefore, an interim review of the EHCP would be requested. The reviews were normally held annually so it would be appropriate to review it sooner due to the change in her circumstances.

In relation to Carmen, who was six months old and not of statutory school age, the Virtual School would speak to the foster carers to advise that she was entitled to some form of education from the age of two and would suggest looking into suitable day nurseries. Signposting to Early Help universal services available to babies and young children to help form appropriate attachments and to help prepare them for nursery and school, would also be provided.

The Virtual School would also plan and help looked after children to make the transition from nursery to primary school and from primary to secondary education. PEPs were reviewed every term.

- Community Learning

C Kemp, Head of Community Learning advised the Panel that within Community Learning, there was a wide-ranging offer of traineeships and apprenticeships starting at 16 plus and also an adult programme of education through the adult skills budget.

Two current projects were The Routes to Work Programme - aimed at adults aged 30 plus with multiple barriers into work; and the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) - aimed at supporting young people, aged 16-29, into work.

In terms of apprenticeships, they started from 16 plus and delivered levels two to five in a range of areas such as business admin, customer service, public service, operational service and supporting teaching and learning in schools.

In relation to the apprenticeship offer for young people who may be looked after or care leavers, additional support was in place with the new apprenticeship programme. At the recruitment stage, once an application was received for the chosen apprenticeship, a young person identified as being looked after or a care leaver, would be guaranteed an interview providing they met the entry criteria. If they were unsuccessful they would be picked up by the Youth Employment Team through the YEI initiative. They would be given additional support and assigned an advisor who would support them in breaking down barriers to move on or to offer work experience through the 50 Futures programme if that was required. Sometime, the young person needed help with confidence in completing applications and interviews or may simply need additional advice to explore other options.

Once the young person had begun an apprenticeship, they were assigned a learning mentor who would remain with them throughout their apprenticeship. The mentor would provide additional support to encourage and build confidence, learn new skills and offer financial advice.

- Fostering Service

In relation to placement sufficiency and foster carer recruitment, the Panel was informed that placements were a scarce commodity due to the high numbers of children looked after. There were currently 11 households going through the recruitment and assessment process. Once assessments were complete, the prospective carers would be considered by the Family Placement Panel as to their suitability. The Panel would make a recommendation regarding the carers' suitability and the ultimate decision was made by the Agency Decision Maker, in this case the Director of Children's Care. Carers could be approved to care for children in various age ranges and numbers depending on the carer's circumstances.

When a child required a foster placement they would be carefully matched with appropriate foster carers. It was highlighted that foster carers' terms of approval varied and provision included short term care, long term care (up to age 18 and beyond), respite care, specialist provision such as mother and baby placements, or specialising in moving children on to adoptive placements which was a very valuable resource.

In terms of Carmen, as she was only six months old, adoption may be in her best interests. Bella was six and it may be possible that both girls could be found an adoptive placement together. An adoptive placement for Adrian was highly unlikely because of his age. There were many issues to take into account such as balancing whether Carmen would benefit more from being placed alone in an adoptive placement and being separated from Bella or whether ensuring they remained together outweighed obtaining an adoptive placement. Adrian's feelings would also need to be considered and whether his birth father would be willing and suitable to care for him.

The recruitment of adopters was undertaken by Adoption Tees Valley (the Regional Adoption Agency for the Tees Valley Local Authorities). Once prospective adopters had been recruited they would be carefully matched with children whose plans were for adoption. The Executive Director was the Agency Decision Maker in relation to adoption and made the final decision as to whether a child's plan should be for adoption and also made the final decision in relation to a match between a child and prospective adopters.

One thing that ran through every aspect of everything that had been covered so far was the voice of the child. Everything should be done through consultation with children and young people. There were children looked after groups – Children in Care Council (CiCC); mini CiCC and Care Leavers Forum – for children and young people to talk about their experiences and how they could influence the work of Children's Social Care. As well as consulting the groups and individual children on the work of Children's Social Care, consultation was carried out on policies and procedures. Consultation with the groups would be undertaken in relation to the participation strategy, the sufficiency strategy, the permanency strategy and the overarching corporate parenting strategy and a children and young people's version would be provided.

In terms of Adrian, Bella and Carmen, it was hoped that they would be found stable, permanent homes quickly and that ideally they could be reunited back home with their birth parents as ultimately this was the permanency that was strived for – to keep children with their birth families when it was safe to do so.

This concluded the detailed presentation demonstrating the breadth of services provided by Children's Services.

A discussion ensued and the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel Member expressed some concern that, in relation to the scenario family, there had been little mention of Mum other than at the start of the process in terms of Early Help. The Member expressed a strong opinion that taking children into care should be the very last resort



and wondered whether Mum's own GP could have been involved to provide help to avoid the children being taken into care, and also addressing the family's housing situation to relieve additional stress that was being placed on the family due to their poor housing conditions. However, it was acknowledged that the Executive Director had concluded the presentation by stating that the preferred permanency option was to keep children with their birth families.

- A Member of the Panel queried, having heard the information provided, how the processes talked about would change in an area that had locality working. The Executive Director responded that locality working was just being established in North Ormesby and Newport. This was still a new process but it was anticipated that gradually Social Workers would take on case work and Social Care Workers would take on case work pertaining to those particular areas and form stronger links with other professionals working in those localities. This would often be outside of Children's services, for example, Street Wardens and other Council services and partners such as GPs. Originally the plan was to locate the multi-agency services within a hub within the ward, however, with more agile working required in the current environment there was some uncertainty as to how this would actually operate. It was known that some wards had very high rates of children coming into care and this was one of the reasons it should be addressed through locality working as it provided an intense concentration and forming of practice around the specific needs of that locality.
- Reference was made to the return home interviews and it was queried whether these were optional and, if so, how often they were refused. The Head of the Youth Offending Service advised that every young person was offered a return home interview following each missing episode. There was usually more than 80% take up of this offer. In the last month, 81% of young people missing from home took up the interview and 79% of young people missing from care took up the interview. Following the interview, the information would be fed back to the Social Worker and consideration would be given as to whether any other services or interventions could be offered to the young person and also whether the young person's plan required amendment as a result of the information they had provided in the interview.
- It was queried what action the authority was taking in relation to the recruitment of foster carers and adopters as it would be preferable for Middlesbrough to have their own in-house carers. The Panel was advised that regular foster carer recruitment events were held and whilst recruitment was a continuous process, there was specific focus at different points in the year. North Yorkshire was currently assisting Middlesbrough with the recruitment of foster carers and supported lodgings for Future for Families. Middlesbrough did quite well with recruitment and very few applicants dropped out of the process. Retention was an important issue and it was recognised that foster carers were very skilled in their own right and dealt with immense challenges.
- It was acknowledged that some foster carers went on to adopt the child/children they had been fostering and it was queried whether this then impacted on the number of fostering placements available. The Director of Children's Care responded that in terms of foster carers that went on to adopt, the service would always look at what was in the best interests of the children in terms of permanence and this was one of the reasons that the recruitment campaigns needed to keep pace. Each year the service analysed sufficiency by looking at how many children had moved from fostering to adoption in that way and the themes could be understood and built into the recruitment campaigns. There were currently 11 prospective foster carers awaiting approval which would mean Middlesbrough would have 11 new carers if they were all successful.
- In addition early permanence was key. Sometimes, where it was apparent that it was in a child's best interests to be adopted, they may be placed with foster carers who were also being assessed as prospective adopters. This was known as twin-tracking and would ensure that children could achieve permanence in a timely way. The recruitment campaigns were key in ensuring that enough interest was generated and sufficient numbers of carers were being assessed at any given point.
- In response to a query, it was clarified that should a foster carer go on to adopt a child, this did not prevent them from continuing to foster providing they had sufficient space, etc within the home.

- A Panel Member referred to the scenario that had been discussed at the meeting, whereby Adrian, aged 14, was unlikely to be adopted and that there was a strong possibility that the siblings would be separated. It was queried how that decision was communicated to the children. The Head of Assessment and MACH stated that separating siblings was always a very final resort and the decision to do so would need to be justified. A whole service approach would be taken in making the decision. In explaining the children's final plan to them, life-story work and preparation would be done with the children over a long period of time in an age-appropriate way. Life-story books started from the day a child was born and included as much information as possible about their early life, family home etc and included photographs. It built on their story through their journey to permanence with the foster carers or adopters adding to that story. It was highlighted that in such cases the Courts would generally require some form of specialist assessment to be undertaken in terms of whether it was in the children's best interests to be separated.
- A Panel Member queried what the timescales were for reporting a looked after child as going missing. The Head of Youth Offending/VEMT stated that it would depend upon the individual child and their circumstances/care plan as to when their foster carers or professionals felt it appropriate to report them missing to the Police.
- Reference was made to the scenario family and it was acknowledged that Adrian would have a PEP in place but it was queried whether he would have had an EHCP in place in respect of his mental health. The Head of the Virtual School responded that it would depend upon the reasons for him not attending school, part of that would be to look at the assessment for example whether it was due to emotional and social mental health or a cognitive issue. The initial PEP meeting would be about gaining an understanding of the child's journey from their perspective as the child generally had the answer.
- The Chair of Corporate Parenting Board wished to highlight that the Board had recently undertaken some corporate parenting training which she encouraged all Councillors to take up. In addition, Adoption Tees Valley were holding a recruitment event in October as part of the National Adoption Recruitment Campaign. Members were also invited to attend the Council's Corporate Parenting Board meetings should they wish to do so.

The Executive Director highlighted that the scenario presented to the Panel was stereotypical and not exhaustive and had been provided to try and demonstrate the breadth of the work that was undertaken within Children's Services. It was suggested that the Panel might wish to focus on particular aspects of the service in more depth to focus on permanency and perceptions of children in care and to keep the scenario family going through the meetings.

The Chair thanked all of the Officers for their attendance and the information provided.

The Panel discussed what further information it might wish to receive at future meetings, relevant to the current scrutiny topic and the following was highlighted:-

- To monitor the caseloads of Social Workers and monitor the numbers of children and families waiting for help and support from Children's Social Care.
- The Panel expressed an interest in having a compiled list of possible shadowing opportunities within Children's Social Care for Members in order to gain greater understanding of the work undertaken by the service. It was acknowledged that such opportunities would only be undertaken when it was safe to do so.
- To monitor progress on the improvement plan and examine changes made/being made to practice and processes.
- To invite/obtain views of the Children in Care Council in relation to their experiences of Children's Social Care.
- To invite a Panel Member to share his own experiences of a pathway through Children's Social Care.

- To examine recruitment and retention of Foster Carers in terms of placement sufficiency and permanency.
- To receive further information in relation to the young people in Middlesbrough's care.
- To examine the use of external placements.

**AGREED** that the information provided be noted and considered in the context of the Panel's current scrutiny topic.

## **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE**

The Chair provided a verbal update in relation to the business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meetings held on 23 July and 3 September 2020, namely:-

### 23 July 2020

- Executive forward work programme.
- Executive Member update – Regeneration
- Middlesbrough Council Covid-19 update - Response and Test, Track and Trace.
- Budget and Balanced Scorecards – Year end 2019/20.
- Scrutiny Chairs' Updates.

### 3 September 2020

- Executive forward work programme.
- Covid 19 update – Education and skills.
- Scrutiny Work programme.
- Scrutiny Chairs' updates.

A Panel Member wished to place on record his thanks to R Brown, Director of Education and Partnerships, who had provided an excellent update on the impact of Covid on schools at the 3 September 2020 meeting.

**AGREED** that the information provided be noted.

## **DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel was scheduled for Monday, 12 October 2020 at 4.00pm.