

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

A meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was held on 20 October 2009.

PRESENT: Councillor Brunton (Chair), Councillors Cole, Dryden, C Hobson, J Hobson, Ismail, Kerr, Khan, Purvis and Sanderson.

OFFICERS: J Bennington, G Brown, P Clark, A Crawford, J Ord, N Pocklington and N Sayer.

**** PRESENT BY INVITATION:** Councillor Carr, Executive Member for Children, Families and Learning
Councillor Mrs B Thompson, Executive Member for Public Health and Sport.

**** AN APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE** was submitted on behalf of Councillor Elder.

**** DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

No declarations of interest were made at this point of the meeting.

**** MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 22 September 2009 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

EXECUTIVE MEMBERS – ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

In a report of the Scrutiny Support Officer the Board was reminded of arrangements for individual Members of the Executive to attend meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Board and update Members on their respective work in terms of their aims, aspirations, objectives, priorities and any emerging issues. The process was part of the arrangements of 'holding the Executive to account' and also provided the opportunity for the Board to identify or highlight any issues of concern.

NOTED AND APPROVED

EXECUTIVE MEMBER – PUBLIC HEALTH AND SPORT

The Chair welcomed Councillor Mrs B Thompson, Executive Member for Public Health and Sport to the meeting who focussed on the main areas of work during what was regarded as an active year. It was acknowledged that the benefits of many of the aspirational objectives of the portfolio were long-term.

An indication was given of the activities associated with the following: -

- a) Healthy Living Towns Initiative focussing on areas of deprivation, youth, obesity, eating healthy, promoting exercise, problems associated with alcohol;
- b) Stop Smoking campaigns – MPs continued to be lobbied regarding the methods of selling cigarettes and significant work being undertaken in schools;
- c) successful bid for Heritage and BIG Lottery Funds for Stewart Park the proposals for which included a separate project to teach horticultural skills to adults with disabilities and council apprentices;
- d) Youth Dance project running until summer 2010 which was part of Middlesbrough's Healthy Town programme aimed to get at least 2,500 young people aged eight to 24 dancing;

The Board sought clarification on a number of areas and acknowledged the positive outcomes after a year of operation of the portfolio although it was recognised that many of the benefits of the initiatives would not be realised for many years.

In discussing some of the initiatives in particular those involving the deprived areas Members requested that further information be provided as to the targets which had been set for 2010/2011 and measured outcomes for next year.

Specific reference was made to the growing success of several community events such as the PCT 3k Fun Run and the annual 10k Road Run Race. Reference was also made to the community and voluntary groups, which could bid, for a share of the Communities for Health Initiative Fund with a maximum amount of £5,000 per project which was part of the Healthy Towns Initiative. The success of the schemes focussed on the sustainability of such projects.

ORDERED that the Executive Member for Public Health and Sport be thanked for the information provided.

EXECUTIVE FEEDBACK – VICTIMS OF CRIME – PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES IN MIDDLESBROUGH

As part of the scrutiny process and in a report of the Executive Office Manager it was reported that the Executive had considered the Board's comments on the following two final reports: -

- a) Victims of Crime – Community Safety and Leisure Scrutiny Panel
- b) Prevention and Early Intervention Services in Middlesbrough – Social Care and Adult Services Scrutiny Panel.

The Executive had considered and supported both the Service and Corporate Management Team responses and had also agreed the proposed Action Plans.

NOTED

OPEN PLAN ESTATES – FINAL REPORT – ECONOMIC REGENERATION AND TRANSPORT SCRUTINY PANEL

The Chair of the Economic Regeneration and Transport Scrutiny Panel outlined the Panel's review of Open Plan Estates.

The Board considered the following recommendations of the Panel based on the submitted evidence: -

- i) That the current open plan policy was appropriate and should be continued.
- ii) That more publicity needed to be given to ensuring that residents were aware of the policy.
- iii) That in order to ensure greater enforcement of the policy a review of staffing should be undertaken with a view to increasing the number of enforcement officers.

ORDERED that the findings and recommendations of the Economic Regeneration and Transport Scrutiny Panel be endorsed and referred to the Executive.

CAR PARKING – JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL – SOUTH TEES HOSPITAL NHS FOUNDATION TRUST RESPONSE

In a report of the Scrutiny Support Officer the Board was advised of the detailed response from the South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust in relation to the Health Scrutiny Panel's Final Report in respect of Car Parking at James Cook University Hospital.

Further to the distribution of the agenda a copy of the draft minutes of the meeting of the Health Scrutiny Panel held on 8 October 2009 had been circulated which outlined the latest discussions regarding car parking at James Cook University Hospital.

In discussing the response from the South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Members requested that further clarification be sought regarding the funding arrangements of the proposed resident car parking scheme in Beechwood.

The Board welcomed the reply from the South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, which was seen as a positive outcome to the scrutiny process.

ORDERED that the report and information provided be noted and referred to the Executive.

SCRUTINY REVIEWS - CONSIDERATION OF REQUESTS – BLUE BADGE SCHEME

It was confirmed that no requests for scrutiny reviews had been received from the Executive, Executive Members, Non Executive Members and members of the public since the last meeting of the Board.

The Scrutiny Support Officer submitted a report, which outlined a request from an Executive Director to consider undertaking an investigation into breaches relating to the Blue Badge Scheme on the following grounds: -

“Firstly, I understand that LINKs (Local Involvement Network) have recently produced a report on disabled parking facilities in Middlesbrough, which makes a number of recommendations for improvement. Social Care haven't been involved in the investigation, but have received a copy the report.

Secondly, we've had a recent case of alleged misuse of a Blue Badge, which has exposed a need for us to clarify responsibility for dealing with such matters, particularly the respective contributions of Social Care, and Parking Enforcement?

Thirdly, the Dept for Transport issued their Blue Badge Reform Programme in July 2009, which states that local authorities will have new or amended powers to reduce misuse of blue badges and prevent their abuse. Although these new measures won't be in place until 2011/12, is there anything we should/could do to prepare ourselves?”

Taking into account the agreed criteria the Board considered the appropriateness of undertaking a scrutiny review into the suggested topic.

ORDERED that a scrutiny investigation be undertaken by the Social Care and Adult Services Scrutiny Panel.

SCRUTINY PANELS – PROGRESS REPORTS

A report of the Chair of each Scrutiny Panel was submitted which outlined progress on current activities.

NOTED AND APPROVED

****EXCLUSION – PRESS – PUBLIC**

The Board was asked to consider whether or not the press and public be excluded from the meeting in respect of the following agenda item on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 and that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

ORDERED that the press and public be not excluded from the meeting for consideration of the next agenda item.

SAFEGUARDING SERVICES – BUDGET PRESSURES – CHILDREN FAMILIES AND LEARNING

The Deputy Director, Safeguarding, presented a report which outlined current budget pressures in Safeguarding Services and the measures that had been put in place to address the increased demand for services.

The Board was advised that the Safeguarding Service was facing an unprecedented increase in demand for its services as the numbers of children who were the subject of Protection Plans and the numbers of Looked After Children increased year on year. In 2001, 164 children had been the subject of a Protection Plan and in 2009, 309 which reflected an 88% increase. In 2001, there were 225 Looked After Children and in 2009, 304 which showed a 35% increase.

It was noted that similar increases had been shown across the majority of Councils within the region. It was pointed out however that a recent survey had shown that social workers in Middlesbrough had larger caseloads of priority cases than colleagues in neighbouring Councils.

In terms of current staffing the Board was advised that Middlesbrough Council had 87 social worker posts across the four Locality teams, the Enquiry and Assessment Team and the five Specialist Teams. It was noted that the Authority had been relatively successful in recruiting new staff and retaining existing staff.

It was reported that the most significant areas of budgetary pressure were placements for Looked After Children. The use of agency placements had become common practice as demand for placements had increased, as had the complexity of the children who required placements. It was acknowledged that this was an area of activity that must be carefully managed.

The report outlined some of the actions that been taken in order to alleviate the situation, which included: -

- a) following negotiations the majority of agencies had agreed not to increase fostering fees;
- b) following negotiations with the current preferred provider no increase had been incurred for placements since 2008/2009 and a new age range banded payment system had been agreed for new placements from 1 April 2009 which had also resulted in savings;
- c) residential fee negotiations had also resulted in savings;
- d) the cost of some residential placements had also been challenged and in 2009/2010 negotiations had resulted in fee reductions where than one child had been placed.

Since April 2009 there had been 71 new fostering placements of which 28 had now ceased. The total additional budget pressure of such placements was reported as £1,103,122. There had been 14 new residential placements of which four had now ceased. The total annual budget increase for such placements was reported as £748,023.

It was noted that monthly Children in Care Budget meetings were held in order to closely monitor such budgets and an action plan had been put in place to evidence the work undertaken by the department in order to relieve the budget pressure.

Alongside the actions to manage the placement market, four strategies had been identified to seek to reduce the overall number of Looked After Children, which included: -

- i) following the appointment of a new Common Assessment Framework Co-ordinator the local CAF Panels were being reinvigorated to target vulnerable children with early intervention packages, which in the medium to long term resulted in a reduction in the number of children who would be accommodated;
- ii) a Family Group Conference Convenor had been identified as such conferences were seen as an effective way of managing and enabling families to address their own problems;

- iii) the number of children placed at home with their parents on Care Orders was being reviewed;
- iv) a further strategy to reduce the number of Looked After Children was to review 21 children who were in long-term foster placements by encouraging foster carers to apply for Special Guardianship Orders.

In an attempt to better understand the increase in activity, a 'Needs Assessment' of Safeguarding was being undertaken. At the same time, discussions were being held with the University of Teesside and a research project was under consideration to consider the increase in Child Protection and Looked After Children activity within the context of preventative work, agency decision-making and thresholds within the Town.

The report also outlined proposals to review the staffing structure and reduce the necessity of using agency social workers.

The Board acknowledged that as the number of Looked After Children and children who were the subject of Protection Plans had increased there had been a corresponding pressure on resources and staff. Details were given of actions, which had been taken to manage the workload of staff, which would result in more rigorous interventions in families at an earlier stage.

It was recognised that the increase in demand was not a local phenomenon, although the increase was more significant within Middlesbrough. Work was being commissioned to increase understanding around the reasons as to why Middlesbrough had seen an unprecedented increase in activity.

Reference was made to strategies in place to reduce the numbers of Looked After Children and measures were in hand to manage the placement market, which although in its early stage was proving to be an effective strategy. It was confirmed that the Council would continue to use agency social workers in the short to medium term to supplement front-line services whilst permanent staff gain experience and appropriate training.

The Board sought clarification on a number of areas in particular the complexities of the nature of the work and the measures being taken to understand better the reasons for the significant increase in Middlesbrough of the number of Looked After Children and children who were the subject of Protection Plans. Members requested further information regarding a figure of £770,288 identified in the report as savings on those placements where it was considered would not continue through 2009/2010.

ORDERED as follows: -

1. That the information provided be noted.
2. That a further update be submitted in a few months time and additional information be provided as to the reasons for the identified savings on placements for Looked After Children in 2009//2010.

CALL IN REQUESTS

It was confirmed that no requests had been received to call-in a decision.

NOTED