

AD HOC CHILDRENS TRUST SCRUTINY PANEL

FINAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

1. Whilst always a topic of huge national interest, it is difficult to remember a time when children's services, the way they are provided and the outcomes that they produce have been under greater national scrutiny. The notion that one agency can improve life chances and life outcomes for children has also been dismissed and the value and worth of partnership working is now firmly embedded into the public policy debate.
2. Childrens Trusts are a major development of that public policy debate around partnerships and are themselves part of the wider Local Strategic Partnership. It is clear that they have a crucial role to play in considering the effectiveness of services, the outcomes being delivered for children and being a crucial advocate for children and young people, in all areas of public policy which impinge upon their lives.
3. It is also the unanimous view of public policy experts that the UK faces a considerable period where public spending increases are likely to be minimal, if there are any increases at all. A tighter financial climate makes it all the more important that the public sector gets more for every pound it spends and an integral way of doing this is to work more closely with partners. The Children's Trust is an excellent example of such an arrangement. It is against this multi-layered backdrop of public interest, that the Panel wanted to consider the role played by the Children's Trust in Middlesbrough.

Terms of Reference

4. To ascertain the achievements to date of the Middlesbrough Children's & Young People's Trust.
5. To ascertain the major challenges that Middlesbrough Children's & Young People's Trust can expect to face in the next three to five years.
6. To establish the Trust's goals for the next three to five years.

7. To ascertain how the Trust goes about engaging with Children, Young People, parents and schools, in considering the effectiveness of the Trust and the services it provides.

Conclusions

8. The Panel has seen a clear commitment of partners to the Children's Trust and the vision it has. On the basis of the evidence that the Panel has considered, there is shared vision across most of the partners and a desire to make a significant impact as a Children's Trust. A shared vision, partnership culture and aspiration are to be commended and welcomed. However, the Panel would like to highlight that a shared vision and strong partnership ethos are simply the building blocks required for a successful Children's Trust, they do not guarantee, nor are they intrinsic measures of, a successful Children's Trust. Now that these undoubtedly important aspects are in place, the Panel feels that the Children's Trust should move on from citing them as achievements, build on them and concentrate on identifying the outcomes it would like to deliver and commission for, through that partnership.
9. Statutory guidance is very clear that, Children's Trusts should be a fulcrum in the local community, adopting a high profile leadership role in advancing the debate on children's services, the wider determinants of child wellbeing and heavily influencing the commissioning and design of services. On the basis of the evidence received and the opinions considered, the Panel remains to be convinced that the Children's Trust is the fulcrum for debate and thought regarding service developments within Children's Services, and wider child wellbeing issues, across the town. The Panel feels this is at present an under utilised function of the Children's Trust.
10. One of the key functions of the Children's Trust is to heavily influence the Commissioning Strategies of the partners, particularly the local authority and NHS Middlesbrough, who spend a significant amount of money on services for Children. The Panel feels that there is undoubtedly scope for the Children's Trust to have a greater impact on the commissioning plans of partners, as the Trust starts to assert itself as the leading body for discussions and thought about children's services. Still, the Panel would conclude that the Children's Trust's impact on commissioning plans and commissioning decisions is still somewhat underdeveloped.
11. The Panel has heard that, the Children's Trust should be the fulcrum for children's services and the key forum for discussions about children's services and wider child wellbeing in Middlesbrough. It can only fulfil this role if it has swift access to detailed, current and reliable data, which can then be intelligently interpreted to support commissioning or decommissioning decisions. The Panel has heard on a number of occasions that concerns persist about the quality and currency of the data available to the Children's Trust, pertaining to local health outcomes and, therefore, local need. The Panel would make the point that if the Children's Trust is going to be a leading protagonist in the debate about the

commissioning and decommissioning of services for children and their families, the data and intelligence used is required to be beyond reproach. As such, the Panel wishes to highlight this point and ask whether the Children's Trust has access to a sufficiently well resourced Research & Intelligence function. The Panel acknowledges that in a time of budget constraint, such functions can be eroded, although it becomes even more crucial in such times of budget constraint that commissioning decisions are taken on the best possible evidence.

12. The Panel has heard on numerous occasions that the Children's Trust is not an organisation in its own right, nor is it a commissioner in its own right. Instead, the Children's Trust should seek to influence the strategic direction of partner organisations and how those partners deploy resources to improve the lives and outcomes for children and their families. With that influencing role in mind, the Panel finds it confusing and somewhat concerning, that the Children's Trust does not report on a systematic basis on its activities and achievements to either the Executive of Middlesbrough Council, nor the Board of NHS Middlesbrough. Without a regular and systematic link to these two crucial decision making bodies, it is difficult to see how the Trust can influence the commissioning decisions of the Council or NHS Middlesbrough. Further, given the profound importance of the subject matter that the Children's Trust considers, the Panel feels that the Middlesbrough Council Executive and Board of NHS Middlesbrough should receive systematic, detailed updates of progress. This would enable the Executive and Board to become more involved with the Children's Services agenda and question when required.
13. The Panel has considered a great deal of evidence and opinion on how well information is shared between partners within the Children's Trust, particularly relating to service delivery. The Panel has heard from the local authority and NHS Middlesbrough that information sharing in Middlesbrough is good and practices are well developed. On the other hand, it has heard from Cleveland Police that information sharing between partners particularly around local need, is in need of substantial improvement. The Panel has not been able to completely understand the reason for such a difference of opinion, but feels duty bound to report it. Clearly, if a statutory partner within the Children's Trust feels that information sharing between partners could improve, it should be a priority for the Children's Trust to tackle.
14. The Panel has heard from a number of contributors that some outcome measures, particularly around childhood obesity and teenage conceptions, are starting to show positive movement. Whether this is because of the Children's Trust or not is difficult to tell, but the Panel feels that improved partnerships and better organisational links, brought about by the Children's Trust, are likely to have had a positive impact. Still, when considering the impact that the Children's Trust has had, the Panel heard a lot of opinion and observations, which by their very nature are difficult to quantify. It is precisely this lack of objective performance or outcomes measures, which the Panel would like to see remedied. The Panel is mindful of a conversation with the Chief Executive of Middlesbrough

Council, where it was accepted that someone in that position, has no readily accessible, impartial information source to consult and consider the performance of the Children's Trust. The Panel accepts that this would be difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, the introduction of meaningful outcome measures is crucial for the Trust to demonstrate its impact and for those such as local authority chief executives, wanting to fulfil their own responsibilities, to satisfy themselves of its contribution.

15. The Panel also considers the relationship of the Children's Trust with the Middlesbrough Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) to be absolutely crucial. In line with national guidance, it is critical that the LSCB's independence is respected, so challenge may take place where appropriate. In addition, whilst the Children's Trust is not a Safeguarding body per se, it is vital that the Children's Trust is actively considering issues that are connected to Safeguarding, such as child poverty, the family environment and levels of aspiration. The Panel wishes to make it quite clear that if the Children's Trust does not also focus on the wider determinants of child wellbeing, in addition to children's health services, it will be missing a vital aspect of improving outcomes for children and their families.
16. The Children's Trust has a good track record of engaging with children and young people to seek their views on the issues that affect them. This has also been noted by external inspection.
17. The Panel feels that progress has been made by the Children's Trust, although there remains a great deal to do. It is perhaps understandable that in time of public spending restraint, there could be a desire to retreat into organisational silos and protect organisational budgets. However, the Panel feels that a tighter financial climate is precisely the time when integration should be enhanced, to ensure expertise are shared and the maximum benefit is derived from every resource available. The Panel would like to see the Children's Trust further develop as a partnership, so this can happen.
18. The Children's Trust, as a partnership, is under a statutory obligation to prepare a new Children & Young People's Plan (CYPP), to be in place by April 2011. The Panel also feels that this is an opportune time for the Children's Trust to restate its ambitions, where it would like to be in 2014 and how it intends to get there, set against the backdrop of the new financial reality facing public services.

Recommendations

19. That the Children's Trust establishes a clear and systematic link with Middlesbrough Council's Executive and the Board of NHS Middlesbrough, to ensure that there is a regular dialogue about children's services, with two key decision making bodies. The Panel also seeks assurance that the Chief Executives of NHS Middlesbrough and Middlesbrough Council regularly monitor progress, to discharge their own responsibilities.

20. That the new CYPP clearly identifies the priority areas for the Children's Trust to tackle until 2014. It should also clearly state how progress against those themes will be measured and specify what actions are expected from which partners to achieve those goals.
21. That the Children's Trust critically appraises whether the Trust has access to a sufficiently strong research and intelligence function, to provide the high quality and current intelligence the Trust requires to discharge its duties effectively and provide the detailed evidence required to advance arguments about service and policy development.
22. That the Children's Trust develops outcomes based measuring framework, which can outline the progress that the Children's Trust is making and the impact it is having. This should also be publicly available to ensure those not on the Children's Trust can satisfy themselves of the progress being made.
23. That the Children's Trust asserts itself as the principal forum for the discussion of children's issues within Middlesbrough and takes steps to raise its profile to a level consistent with its importance.
24. That the Children's Trust becomes much more heavily involved in influencing the commissioning and decommissioning of services for children and their families, making the case for service change where reliable intelligence supports the point. The Panel would like to hear how the Children's Trust will seek to do this.
25. That the Children's Trust becomes much more involved in the wider debate about children's wellbeing in the town and takes every opportunity to influence public policy, to ensure that it is consistent with the needs of children and young people.
26. That the Children's Trust partners increase the levels of integration between services to ensure maximum impact is delivered for the resources deployed. This should extend to the introduction of pooled or aligned budgets whenever most appropriate. The Panel would like to hear how the partners are advancing the sharing of expertise and resources to deliver a shared agenda.