

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

A meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was held on 23 September 2010.

PRESENT: Councillors Brunton (Chair), Councillors Dryden, J Hobson, Ismail, Kerr, Khan, Purvis, Sanderson, J A Walker and Williams.

OFFICERS: J Bennington, J Catron, P Clark and R Pink.

**** APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** were submitted on behalf of Councillors Cole, C Hobson and Mawston.

**** DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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 8 September 2010 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

WINTER MAINTENANCE – INTRODUCTORY REPORT

The Senior Scrutiny Officer submitted a report the purpose of which was to remind Members of the terms of reference of its current scrutiny review in respect of winter maintenance and to introduce representatives from the Children, Families and Learning and, Social Care Departments to provide information on their service perspective and from the experiences gained during the last winter.

Reference was made to information previously forwarded to Members regarding the Winter Resilience Review Interim Report issued in July 2010 and the Council's draft Winter Maintenance Plan 2010/2011.

Following research by the Scrutiny Support Officer the Board was advised that from the evidence available it was apparent that the Council's insurance section had indicated no significant increase in the number of claims over the last winter period. The Board was informed, however, that information from the local NHS had shown an increase in the number of fall related injuries in respect of 2009/2010 although this was an overall figure and details could not be provided of specific numbers during December 2009 and January 2010. Information available from LINks had also demonstrated an increase in the number of falls over the last winter period.

Since the circulation of the report the Board was advised that representatives of the Highways Agency and the Fire Authority had confirmed their attendance at the meeting of the Board to be held on 13 October 2010.

Members discussed other potential witnesses to provide evidence in respect of the current review.

ORDERED as follows: -

1. That the information provided be noted.
2. That arrangements be made for an additional meeting of the Board to be held on 3 November 2010 at 10.00 a.m. to which representatives of the Probation Service and Erimus Housing be invited to attend to give their perspective on winter maintenance.

WINTER MAINTENANCE – SOCIAL CARE AND ADULT SERVICES DEPARTMENT

The Chair welcomed the Commissioning and Development Officer, Middlesbrough Adult Social Care Department, who presented a report which focussed on the difficulties encountered during the winter of 2009-2010 in respect of social care planning and policies for providing care for vulnerable people.

The Social Care Department had for many years worked in conjunction with colleagues in the health sector; to plan for the increase in demand for services that occurred during the winter months. Each year, a Tees-wide winter plan was produced to ensure effective communication linked between the acute sector and community services. Such information which included key contact details, out of hours cover was shared across the Primary Care Trusts, the Acute Trusts and the Mental Health Trust and co-ordinated by the Strategic Health Authority.

To facilitate the winter planning process a checklist was drawn up to report such issues as A & E closures, cancellation of elective operations and increased waiting times. An example was given whereby a closure of a hospital ward could result in increased demands for community services and the pressures could be alleviated by utilising spare capacity in care homes using hospital staff to support community nurses or purchasing more hours from independent care providers. The daily situation reports were made available to social care through the Duty Team, Hospital Social Work Team and Middlesbrough Intermediate Care Centre. Regular multi-agency meetings took place to discuss the winter plans and their effectiveness.

The winter of 2008-2009 had resulted in unprecedented demands on the Acute Sector, which had tested the effectiveness and resilience of emergency care provision. As a result, NHS chief executives across the region decided that there was a need to collectively refocus on winter pressures to ensure appropriate plans were in place. A multi-agency South of Tees Winter Planning Group had been established in July 2009.

The Board was advised that in October 2009, the Winter Planning and Tees Operational Flu Resilience Leads groups had been merged to form the Tees Surge Management Group which developed standardised escalation plans for health and social care organisations and agreed escalation trigger points. During the last winter period of 2009/2010, the Health leads on the Surge Management Group had frequently asked the Department of Social Care representatives to provide updates on salt supplies and gritting arrangements. The Council's Winter Maintenance Plan for 2009/2010 had also been sent to the Surge Management Group.

The Board was advised that the in-house home care, care link, rapid response and reablement services had been fully operational throughout the severe weather conditions as were the contracted home care services from the four domiciliary care providers. Although some delays had occurred service users had been advised accordingly. Work, which had previously been undertaken in preparing for a possible severe pandemic flu outbreak, had been beneficial in that it had strengthened business continuity planning across all health and social care organisations. Such work had assisted in dealing with the problems which had arisen during the severe winter weather conditions and had allowed the domiciliary care providers to be well placed to prioritise service users and ensure that those with the greatest need had some kind of service. It was also pointed out that it would have been possible for the care agencies to provide mutual support if there had been exceptional demands for service.

It was reported that on 8 January 2010 the community transport buses had not been able to operate safely and some clients had been unable to attend the day centres. People who had required further support and the provision of meals had been catered for under temporary variation of contracts. In the event of day services not being able to operate for a prolonged period the business continuity plans for day services allowed for the provision of alternative day services or support at home.

The Board was advised of problems, which had occurred with vehicles having difficulties in getting through the snow at Middlesbrough Intermediate Care Centre. It had been a particular problem for the care link vehicles and also for ambulance access to the Centre. It was pointed out that at one point, the Fire Brigade had been called in to free the vehicles following which the Centre had been placed on the priority list for gritting.

In February 2010 it had been decided that the Surge Management Group would cease and that winter planning issues would be carried forward by an Unplanned Care Board (now the Urgent Care Systems Group) which would examine ways of improving system management, communication management and patient management throughout the system.

Although the winter pressures of 2009/2010 had been dealt with effectively by health and social care agencies it was considered essential that multi-agency planning for winter pressures continued in order to deal with the increased demands that occurred to such issues as seasonal influenza or severe weather. Such work was currently undertaken by the Urgent Care System Group which had representatives from health and social care organisations across Teesside and focussed on issues such as reducing emergency admissions and early supported discharge and surge planning.

Whilst the importance of having a Winter Maintenance Plan was acknowledged Members discussed the feasibility of having a secondary corporate plan based on the evidence received so far around aspects of good practice learned from the experiences during the last winter period. Specific reference was made to the information provided to Members on a regular basis during such a period. The Board discussed the extent to which such information could be made available to others departments.

Following Members' comments on specific incidents involving vulnerable persons information was provided on the procedures in place to cope with such situations such as the departments' Business Continuity Plans and reference made to emergency planning. Whilst it was essential for each department or organisation to have business continuity plans the Board was advised of the benefits of multi-agency planning and working together. The Board recognised the importance of shared information in such circumstances but also referred to the need to cope with varying requirements of each local authority. Whilst Members acknowledged that information was available in a variety of ways from each organisation the benefits of having a single point of contact during adverse weather conditions was discussed or should that not prove possible it was felt that there was a need raise awareness to the telephone numbers of the various services required.

The Board was mindful of the implications of the recent White Paper regarding the future of the NHS with specific regard to the proposed increased role for local government in the promotion of and the delivery of public health services.

Reference was made to the information previously provided in relation to the increase in the number of fall related injuries during the last winter period. Members sought clarification and requested information on any associated increases in terms of after care, which the Department of Social Care had to cope with.

ORDERED that the information provided be noted and incorporated into the overall review.

SEVERE WEATHER CONDITIONS – ADVICE AND GUIDANCE TO SCHOOLS

The Chair welcomed the Deputy Director of Achievement who presented a report, which set out the role of the Local Authority in terms of advice and guidance to schools during periods of severe weather.

Following advice from the Department of Education Middlesbrough's Local Authority position was that decisions about school closure should be delegated to individual schools because they were best placed to make critical judgements about conditions in their areas. Nonetheless, in particularly severe situations the Local Authority was still able to direct maintained and Voluntary Aided schools to close. It was confirmed, however, the current policy within Children, Families and Learning was to consult with school leaders on particular problems they may be experiencing so that the rationale for the decision made by a school was clearly understood and agreed by all parties.

It was confirmed that local authorities did not have the power to oblige foundation or voluntary aided schools, or academies, to close, but may come to an agreement with governing bodies, that these schools would close if area-wide closure seemed necessary, but only in extreme

circumstances. As schools became more autonomous Members asked if there might be scope in establishing appropriate links with the Council in terms of assisting with such aspects as contacting the media.

The principle underpinning any decision to close due to severe weather was that schools should plan for severe weather on the assumption that they would generally stay open. It was considered that contingency plans should be in place which included: -

- contact details for pupils, their families and staff;
- ensuring stocks of salt or grit were maintained;
- identifying which walkways or areas needed to be kept clear to allow people to get around the premises safely;
- estimating how many staff members needed to get in for the school to operate safely, if not to deliver the full normal curriculum.

When making a decision about closure of a school, it was necessary to balance the likely accuracy of weather forecasts against the benefits of early decisions to help parents and staff plan ahead. It was acknowledged, however, that in many cases, decisions would need to be taken in the hours immediately before the start of a school day. Of crucial importance was to ascertain if there was sufficient staff to provide adequate supervision for the expected number of pupils attending school.

It was acknowledged that closing a school had a clear impact on children and families but that remaining open may increase risks arising from less supervision and longer journeys to and from schools.

It was suggested that there might be practical steps schools could take to manage such increased risks including: -

- reducing the extent to which children had to move between school buildings for different lessons;
- bringing some classes together in the hall to ensure adequate supervision;
- ending the school day early so that children did not get home too late but at the same time making arrangements for children who could not get collected by parents until later.

It was considered that when severe weather coincides with public examinations, head teachers should make every effort to open for examination candidates even if the rest of a school was closed.

It was acknowledged that communication with parents and the general public was clearly very important. Schools had a variety of mechanisms for disseminating decisions about school closure including telephone and use of local media.

Members discussed the procedures leading up to a decision being made about closure. Prior to such decisions being devolved to individual schools local authorities previously had a scheme whereby staff living nearest a school were utilised to assist in extreme and difficult weather conditions.

The severe weather experienced by schools in the winter of 2009/2010 had resulted in a number of school closures in Middlesbrough and elsewhere in the region. The Executive Director of Children, Families and Learning and the Deputy Director of Achievement had both been available so that the weather forecast and patterns could be monitored and a senior Officer was on hand to provide advice and guidance for school leaders. The Board suggested that further information be provided on which schools had closed and the reasons for such closure.

In terms of future planning the Board was advised that it was proposed to provide opportunities for school leaders to discuss contingency planning with respect to severe weather at head teacher forums prior to the onset of winter in 2010. Such arrangements would provide an opportunity to reiterate the severe weather protocols, rationalise schools' responses to severe weather and to reinforce contingency planning arrangements in an endeavour to ensure that school leaders would be more confident in their response to severe weather to enable a school to remain open whenever possible.

In response to clarification sought regarding the incidence of fall related injuries it was confirmed that the schools would be requested to check the individual accident books for such information.

ORDERED that the information provided be noted and incorporated into the overall review.