**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD**

A meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was held on 5 January 2016.

**PRESENT:** Councillors Councillors: J Sharrocks, J G Cole, J Culley, J McGee and F McIntyre and D Rooney.

**PRESENT BY INVITATION:** Councillor M Carr.

**OFFICERS:** A Crawford, J Lewis and C Lunn.

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** Councillors: E Dryden, T Higgins, C Hobson, N Hussain, T Mawston, J A Walker and J Rathmell..

15/58 **MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD - 8 DECEMBER 2015.**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 December 2015 were approved as a correct record.

15/59 **ATTENDANCE OF EXECUTIVE MEMBERS AT THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD: COUNCILLOR M CARR - LEAD EXECUTIVE MEMBER - CHILDREN'S SERVICES.**

A report had been circulated to the Board which provided information regarding the scheduled attendance of Members of the Executive at the Overview and Scrutiny Board.

Today's meeting was attended by Councillor M Carr, Lead Executive Member for Children's Services.

The Executive Member made the following points in particular:-

- Elements of Children's Services essentially covered three Executive Member Portfolios: Education, Learning and Skills, as explained at the previous meeting of the Board, was the responsibility of Councillor Brunton, whereas other elements, such as early intervention, rested within Councillor Thompson's Portfolio. In order to share understanding of the various roles and responsibilities, the three Executive Members met on a monthly basis.
- The responsibility of the role generally concerned the Safeguarding of Children aged 0-18 years. It was explained that when young people reached the age of 18, they either moved outside the responsibility of Children's Services and, depending on the issues experienced, progressed into adulthood and on with their own lives, or they became the responsibility of Adult Services. The latter tended to occur if they had disabilities. Individuals may have remained under the Council's responsibility until the age of 21, or in some cases 25, whilst completing their education.
- Reference was made to the Executive Member report which had been submitted to the 6 January 2016 full Council meeting. It had been identified that within Middlesbrough, there were just over 1400 Children in Need; Social Services were aware of these cases and were providing support.

It was explained that this number had been significantly reduced from the high point of over 2000. One reason for this reduction was administrative-based, with the closure of cases being achieved.

The current figure of 1400 equated to approximately 440 children for every 10,000 within the population. It was acknowledged that Middlesbrough was on the high end of the national statistics.

It was explained to Members that, of the 1400 Children in Need, just over 200 of these had protection plans in place, and 374 were under the care of the Local Authority. This latter figure was high nationally, although it had plateaued in recent years. It was explained that approximately five years ago, there were around 270 children in care. In 2009/2010, this did increase rapidly in the aftermath of the 'Baby P' case. For some considerable time, the 360/370 level had been maintained. Despite Middlesbrough having a high level, it was

indicated that a number of other authorities were still seeing an increase in their statistics.

In response to an enquiry regarding the statistics, it was explained that part of Middlesbrough's strategy was to avoid taking children into care unless absolutely necessary. This was partially due to financial resources, but was also in place to ensure that the child's best interests were being met, with other ways being sought for supporting both them and their families being fully examined first. It was highlighted that the statistics also reflected those areas of higher deprivation.

- Also included within the Executive Portfolio was the Youth Offending Service. It was highlighted that the number of children involved with the service had declined quite considerably, not because of the decrease in crime and Anti-Social Behaviour, but by the way that children were being handled by the service in ensuring that they did not become involved in the criminal justice system.
- Another area covered within the portfolio concerned the Council's monitoring of children who were believed to be in danger of sexual exploitation.
- There were a variety of social work teams involved in Children's Services. These included a referrals team, fostering and adoption teams, the youth offending service, and a pathways team, which dealt with children leaving care. Regarding the latter, it was highlighted that 12 young people who had been in the authority's care were now at University, which was excellent. There was a sub-regional VEMT team which was responsible for children at risk of being vulnerable, exploited, missing and/or trafficked. This was a joint-agency group which included health, police, Local Authorities and housing agencies sharing information. It was felt that this heavily facilitated monitoring and safeguarding activities.
- Reference was made to the Middlesbrough Safeguarding Children's Board, which although chaired by an independent person, was the responsibility of the Local Authority to operate it. Representatives from various organisations such as police, schools, the health service and the Local Authority attended meetings. Safeguarding was not solely an issue or responsibility for the Local Authority, but for a number of different organisations.
- With regards to Corporate Parenting, it was explained that all Councillors were responsible for this. A presentation was given to Members last year which provided information on the role and responsibilities aligned to this. Monitoring of this was undertaken through a multi-agency partnership entitled Forum for Looked After Children (FLAC), which improved corporate responsibilities by facilitating information-sharing between such teams as family placement, pathways and virtual school.
- Regarding the virtual school, it was explained that a virtual Head Teacher was in post to monitor all looked after children in schools. It was explained that because of the difficulties that looked after children had endured, educational achievement tended to be poor. Nevertheless however, the figures for looked after children in Middlesbrough, in comparison to looked after children in other parts of the country, held up well and, in some instances, were better.

A Member made reference to recent site visits to three schools that had been undertaken by Members of the Children and Learning Scrutiny Panel. It was highlighted that the level of care observed was very impressive, and although the academic outcomes did not appear to match this statistically, observation of the social skills being developed was excellent.

- Information pertaining to budgets was provided to the Board. It was explained that, for a number of years, social care in respect of both children's and adult services, had been demand-led. Within the current circumstances and austerity, it was felt that this could not be sustained. The overall budget for Children's Services was currently in the region of £27m. However, although the budget had been largely protected until now, from 2015 savings cuts were looking to be made. In the current year 2015/2016, around £750,000 needed to be saved. In 2016/2017 this was around £2.6m and in 2017/2018 approximately £5m.

In response to an enquiry, it was explained that savings would try to be made by changing the ways services were offered - aiming to be more proactive and not just reactive to issues as they arose. Reference was made to the notion of early intervention and the importance of this in order to support families before they reached crisis point. Intervention work involved many

agencies, including the youth service, Sure Start and schools. In terms of schools, the role of teachers was considered to be especially important in terms of resolving issues. A short discussion ensued with regards to Sure Start centres, their purpose and the impacts that the closure of the centres had had.

Concerning children and complex needs, it was explained that care settings in this regard were very expensive and could potentially cost up to £5,000 per week. It was explained that a revised approached to service commissioning would be undertaken in the future in order to reduce costs.

It was explained that around 70% of looked after children were done so outside of Middlesbrough. Most of them were located in the Tees Valley area; however, there were some instances, particularly in respect of children with complex needs, where children were being cared for further afield, in areas such as Devon and Wales. By trying to bring children back into Middlesbrough, or at least the Tees Valley, it was felt that would assist with cost reduction. Members were advised that £500,000 had been allocated for the creation of a new home in Middlesbrough for children with complex needs, which would accommodate three or four children.

In response to an enquiry, it was explained that there were children from other areas being looked after in Middlesbrough. Reference was made to instances of concern being raised by residents residing in close proximity to private children's homes.

A Member queried split budgets and how this was arranged for children with complex needs, or for people moving into nursing care. In response, it was explained that this had been addressed three or four years ago and was still ongoing, but it had been found that the Local Authority was paying all, or the vast majority of the costs, for the care of children with complex needs. The cost of care and the contributions payable by the different public bodies were being considered in detail.

In response to an enquiry regarding independent children's homes, it was explained that there were some of these in Middlesbrough and there were children from outside of the area residing in these, but the Local Authority did not receive any payment for them as they were not Local Authority-owned. However, in some instances, Social Services may be contracted to visit the children.

With regards to payments to the Local Authority for foster children, it was explained that if a Middlesbrough Council Foster Carer was contracted by another Local Authority, the cost of that care provision would be paid to Middlesbrough Council. Members were advised that approximately 50% of Middlesbrough Council's Foster Carers worked for independent agencies. It was felt that by increasing the number of in-house Foster Carers in order to reduce the amount of money being paid to external agencies would not only contribute to budget savings, but would also allow for other benefits, such as training control, to be attained. This work was still on-going, however to date; this figure had increased from around 70-80 18 months-2 years ago, to around 120 today.
It was felt that the various strategies, i.e. early intervention, review of commissioning processes, bringing children back to Middlesbrough, in-house fostering, and provision of new homes for complex care provision within Middlesbrough, were all part of the process for cost reduction, and would ensure that the quality of service provision could be maintained in the future.

In response to an enquiry regarding budget reduction and any potential impact of asylum families and vulnerable children entering Middlesbrough, it was indicated that this had been very minimal to date.

- The results of the recent Ofsted inspection were expected between the end of January and the end of February 2016. The potential strengths and weaknesses that Members felt were presented by the Authority were considered by the Panel.
- In terms of future working, the Board was advised that the five Tees Valley Authorities had been considering the creation of a joint adoption agency. However, it was indicated that in order to gain Government funding, a new joint agency could not be a

Local Authority service and would need to be established as a separate standalone organisation.

The Board considered the future of Children's Services, and the role of the public sector and the services provided by both it and private organisations.

Consideration was given to joint working between Local Authorities and it was felt that there was room for both opportunity and growth in this regard.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member for his update.

**NOTED**

15/60 **FEEDBACK FROM EXECUTIVE - 1 DECEMBER 2015.**

The Board noted the contents of the submitted report.

**NOTED**

15/61 **EXECUTIVE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME.**

The Board noted the contents of the submitted report.

**NOTED**

15/62 **SCRUTINY PANELS' PROGRESS REPORTS:**

The Board noted the contents of the submitted reports.

The Chair of the Community Safety and Leisure Scrutiny Panel provided the Panel with information pertaining to points of discussion which arose at the last Panel meeting.

**NOTED**

15/63 **ANY OTHER BUSINESS.**

**Next Board Meeting:**

The Chair advised that the next meeting of the Board had been arranged for Tuesday, 2 February 2016. In Councillor Sharrocks' absence, it was indicated that the Vice-Chair would Chair the meeting.

**NOTED**