

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

Date: Tuesday 27th July, 2021
Time: 4.00 pm
Venue: Virtual

AGENDA

Please note: this is a virtual meeting.

The meeting will be live-streamed via the Council's [Youtube channel](#) at 4.00 pm on Tuesday 27th July, 2021

1. Apologies for Absence
2. Declarations of Interest
3. Minutes of the previous meeting of the Children & Young People's Social Care & Services Scrutiny Panel held on 19 April 2021 3 - 8
4. Overview of Children's Services

The Executive Director of Children's Services will be in attendance to provide the Panel with an overview of the main services within its remit and outline the key priorities, issues and challenges for the year ahead. (Verbal)
5. Setting the Scrutiny Panel's Work Programme for 2021/22 9 - 14

The Panel is asked to consider which topics it wishes to include on its proposed Work Programme for 2021/22 for approval by the Overview and Scrutiny Board.
6. Update - Ofsted focused visit to Children's Services 15 - 30

The Executive Director of Children's Services will provide the Panel with a verbal update in relation to the Ofsted focused visit to Children's Services on 26 & 27 May 2021.

7. Update - Covid Recovery in Children's Services

The Executive Director of Children's Services will provide the Panel with a verbal update on Covid recovery in Children's Services.

8. Proposed Schedule of Meeting Dates - 2021/22 Municipal Year

31 - 32

Charlotte Benjamin
Director of Legal and Governance Services

Town Hall
Middlesbrough
Monday, 19 Wednesday 21 July 2021

MEMBERSHIP

Councillors L Garvey (Chair), C Dodds (Vice-Chair), T Higgins, D Jones, M Nugent, Z Uddin, M Storey, J Walker and G Wilson.

Assistance in accessing information

Should you have any queries on accessing the Agenda and associated information please contact Joanne Dixon, 01642 729713, joanne_dixon@middlesbrough.gov.uk

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 19 April 2021.

PRESENT: Councillor Garvey (Chair), Councillor Dodds (Vice Chair); Councillors: Cooper, Higgins, Hill, Uddin, J Walker and Wilson.

OFFICERS: C Breheny, S Butcher, S Davies, J Dixon and G Moore.

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillor Hellaoui – Chair of Corporate Parenting Board.

PRESENT AS AN OBSERVER: Councillor G Ford – London Borough of Havering Council.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were submitted on behalf of Councillor Cooke and Councillor High (invited Member in the role of Lead Member for Children's Services).

** 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 22 March 2021 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

S Davies, Principal Social Worker, was in attendance at the meeting to provide the Panel with an overview in relation to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

The Panel was informed that the Government's manifesto had committed to review the children's social care system to ensure that children and young people got the support they needed. The review would also consider how the care system responded to all children referred in to it and would address major challenges including:-

- the sharp increase in recent years in the number of children becoming looked after
- high and rising unit costs
- inconsistencies in children's social care practice and outcomes across the country
- the failure of the system to provide stable, loving homes for children
- the capacity and capability of the system to support and strengthen families to prevent children being taken into care unnecessarily.

The review was launched in January 2021 and was being independently led by Josh MacAlister, a former school teacher and founder of the Social Work Charity Frontline.

The scope of the review was as follows:-

- Starting from children's experiences – looking at how service provision influenced a child's experience and outcomes. It would prioritise listening to the voices of children, young people and adults that had received help or support from a Social Worker, or who had been looked after.
- All children who were referred to, or involved with, statutory social care – a whole system review, including relevant preventative services such as Early Help.
- All children in care in both formal and informal (kinship) placements – it may also consider those leaving or preparing to leave care, adoption and SEND review.

- Children's social care and interaction with partner agencies – it would review and investigate how those services' roles, responsibilities and accountabilities interacted with Children's Social Care and recommend improvements for working together.

It was highlighted that the review must be workable and lead to deliverable reforms that were evidence-based and demonstrated a measurable impact.

The Panel was informed that the review would focus on the following themes and questions:-

- Support - What support was needed to meet the needs of children who were referred to or involved with social care, in order to improve outcomes and make a long-term positive difference to individuals and to society?
- Strengthening families - What could be done so children were supported to stay safely and thrive with their families, to ensure the exceptional powers that were granted to the state to support and intervene in families were consistently used responsibly, balancing the need to protect children with the right to family life, avoiding the need to enter care?
- Safety - What could be done so children who needed to be in care got there quickly, and to ensure those children felt safe and were not at risk of significant harm?
- Care - What was needed for children to have a positive experience of care that prioritised stability, providing an alternative long-term family for children who needed it and support for others to return home safely?
- Delivery - What were the key enablers to implement the review and raise standards across England, such as a strong, stable and resilient workforce, system leadership and partnerships, and what was needed so that this change could be delivered?
- Sustainability - What was the most sustainable and cost-effective way of delivering services, including high-cost services, who was best placed to deliver them, and how could this be improved so that they were fit for the future?
- Accountability - What accountability arrangements were necessary to ensure that the state could act appropriately, balancing the need to protect and promote the welfare of children with the importance of parental responsibility, and what was needed to ensure proper oversight of how local areas discharged those responsibilities consistently?

The over-arching question that the review aimed to cover was "How we can ensure that children grow up in loving, safe and stable families and, where that was not possible, that care provides the same foundations."

There were various ways in which to become involved in the review, including:-

- Call for Advice – Individuals were able to contact the Lead Reviewer with advice and more than 750 responses had been received to date. There was a commitment for every submission to be read and considered as to how it could shape the review.
- Call for Evidence – primarily aimed at the research community and those with robust evidence that should be considered by the review panel. The call for evidence would consider what was already known about how well the current care system provided love, stability and safety for young people. There had been 200 responses to date.
- From Middlesbrough's point of view, Middlesbrough Council staff could submit their own responses or collective responses.

The review was still in the early stages and groups were still being established to consider how the review should be conducted. This included:-

- Experience by Experts Board – meeting regularly. Two advisory groups consisting of care experienced young people, children's social care professionals, politicians and researchers would feed advice into the Board.
- Evidence Group – made up of academics and experts in the field would support and advise on the evidence being collected. The 'What Works Centre' would support the review by producing and commissioning evidence summaries, rapid reviews and new analysis.
- Design Group – multi-agency group involving a range of professionals across local government, policing, the judiciary, health, education and other areas.

The groups would make recommendations that would contribute towards the case for change in early Summer.

The Panel was advised that people could be kept up to date with the review, including events that would be taking place throughout the year, such as webinars giving the opportunity to hear from experts by experience panel members, progress updates from the independent review chair and there was also the chance to sign up to receive email updates. Members were advised that links to the events and email sign up were included in the presentation which had been circulated to the Panel by email.

During the course of discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- Reference was made to the 750 responses to Calls for Advice and it was queried whether they had been submitted by members of the public or professionals. The Principal Social Worker explained that the responses had been submitted from a range of sources, including individuals and professionals. A breakdown of the responses showed that the majority were submitted by Children's Social Care workers, those with personal experience, carers, charities, education, researchers, health care workers.
- It was queried whether there was a specific impetus for this piece of work taking place. It was explained that the review had been agreed as it was part of the Government's manifesto and it had been referred to as a 'once in a generation review'. The original scope of the review was to focus in on some of the inconsistencies in practice across the country and also to try to gain a better understanding of the increased in the numbers of children becoming looked after. It was a wholly independent review with an independent chair and there were no preconceived ideas about what the outcomes would be. It was open to consultation with a wide range of people that would be effected by the review.

The Chair thanked the Principal Social Worker for attending and for the information provided.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

SUFFICIENCY AND PERMANENCY (PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN CARE) – OVERVIEW OF THE PANEL'S REVIEW TO DATE

The Chair referred to the briefing note that had been provided circulated with the agenda which provided a recap of the evidence the Panel had received to date at each of its meetings in respect of its current review. The Terms of Reference for the review were also provided. The Chair asked Members how the Panel wished to proceed with the review and whether there were any further areas that required further examination prior to the compilation of the Draft Final Report.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel Member suggested that it would be interesting to look at life skills for young people leaving care and how they are prepared for moving to independence. It was acknowledged that whilst this issue did not relate directly to the terms of reference for the current review, it might be something that the Panel could potentially examine in the future as a separate topic.
- A Member suggested that some initial research into whether there were links between poverty and children coming into care could be undertaken.
- A Panel Member highlighted that the voice of the child, particularly in relation to perceptions of children in care, should be gathered, for example, seeking out the views of children in foster care in Middlesbrough.
- A further suggestion in relation to diversity in terms of looked after children within diverse communities within the town should be looked into, however, it was acknowledged that as part of the profile of Middlesbrough's looked after children, provided to the Panel in accordance with Term of Reference 1), this had been addressed in very broad terms. Any further detailed work would need to be undertaken as a separate topic.
- The Democratic Services Officer suggested that the Draft Final Report be formulated for Members' consideration and that should any areas be identified as requiring further information, this could be added to the report prior to its submission to OSB.
- The Executive Director added that since the start of the review, changes had started to happen within the service, particularly the reduction in the numbers of looked after children, and that she would be pleased to provide a short update in relation to the ongoing work for inclusion within the Draft Final Report.
- It was acknowledged that the Panel had undertaken a significant amount of work during the current Municipal Year and it was generally agreed that the review should be concluded within the remit as set by the terms of reference.

AGREED as follows:-

1. That the Draft Final Report be prepared for the Panel's consideration, with a brief addendum from the Executive Director of Children's Services in relation to ongoing work within Children's Services.
2. That any areas identified as requiring additional information, with the approval of the Chair, be undertaken and included in the Draft Final Report.

UPDATE - COVID RECOVERY - CHILDREN'S SERVICES

S Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services, provided the Panel with a verbal update in relation to Covid recovery in Children's Services.

The Panel was advised that the Covid situation was moving from the response to the recovery stage, therefore all recovery plans were now being refreshed. The Children's Services and Education Covid recovery groups were to be reinstated.

Since Easter, only five staff and 14 pupils, all at one school, had been in self-isolation due to Covid. SACRE was undertaking risk assessments in relation to whether two workers could now make home visits together as this was a significant part of the workers' learning and development.

Covid lateral flow testing continued in schools and there had been no issues.

It was suggested that, moving forward into the new Municipal Year, the item on Covid recovery could be reported to the Panel by exception rather than as a standard item.

AGREED that the information provided be noted and that the item on Covid Recovery in Children's Services be reported by exception to the Panel in future.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

The Chair provided a verbal update in relation to the business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 8 April 2021, namely:-

- Executive Forward Work Programme
- Middlesbrough Council's Response to Covid-19
- Executive Member Update – Exec Member for Communities and Education.
- Strategic Plan 2020-2023 – Progress at quarter three 2020-21.
- Revenue and capital budget – projected outturn position at quarter three 2020-21.
- Scrutiny Chairs' Updates

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Adoption Tees Valley

The Chair advised that, following the Panel's previous meeting – attended by the Service Manager from Adoption Tees Valley who provided a very comprehensive presentation - Panel Members were consulted to find out whether they had any further questions they wished to ask. A couple of responses were received from Panel Members and those questions were forwarded to the Service Manager at Adoption Tees Valley. The Service Manager had subsequently updated the report that was provided to the previous meeting and the responses to the additional questions were contained within pages 10-13. A copy of the updated report was circulated to the Panel, for information on 16 April 2021 and had been updated on Modern.gov.

Become Charity - Training in relation to children looked after

Also at the Panel's previous meeting, the Policy and Participation Manger from Become Charity was in attendance to talk about stigma and perceptions of children in care and care leavers.

A couple of things that came out of the discussion were:-

- The importance of language and the damage and detrimental impact that negative language and use of stereotypes can cause by changing perceptions and attitudes.
- The Panel felt that training for all teachers in Middlesbrough schools should be provided in relation to children looked after, including the use of language and stereotypes
- AND that similar training be provided for Members and frontline staff, where appropriate, and also that the local authority look at the use of language within its own services to address negative perceptions and stigma.

In conjunction with the CYP Learning Scrutiny Panel, the Panel had asked what training is currently provided for teachers or how it is planned to address the concerns raised.

In addition, initial enquiries were made with Become Charity to find out what support they might be able to provide to the local authority in terms of training if required.

The Executive Director advised that, as DCS, she intended to select several commonly used/heard phrases/acronyms, for example 'LAC', 'CiN', 'Hard to reach', and would approach how to stop them being used across the authority.

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MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

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

Setting the Scrutiny Panel's Work Programme 2021/2022

27 JULY 2021

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To invite the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel to consider its work programme for the 2021/22 Municipal Year.

BACKGROUND

2. At the start of each Municipal Year, Scrutiny Panels discuss the topics that they would like to review during the coming year.
3. Work programmes are useful as they provide some structure to a Scrutiny Panel's activity and allow for the effective planning and preparation of work.
4. As part of the process for establishing the work programme, support officers gather information/views and suggestions from a number of sources. Below is a list of topics which are anticipated to be of interest to the Scrutiny Panel. Members are advised that the list of possible topics is not exhaustive and that additional topics can be added and considered at the Scrutiny Panel meeting.

Topic carried over from 2020/21

- Sufficiency and Permanency (Perceptions of Children in Care) - (Draft Final Report to be considered in September 2021).

Topical Issues and Suggestions

Topic/Suggestion	Details
Domestic Abuse – new statutory duties on Councils	The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 places a duty on local authorities to provide support to victims of domestic abuse and their children in refuges and other safe accommodation. Additionally, all eligible homeless victims of domestic abuse automatically have 'priority need' for homelessness assistance from their local authority. Recently, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) published the funding allocations for council homelessness priority for the 2021/22 financial year. This is to assist councils with the new financial burden that all councils now have across England. The Act places a legal duty on local authorities to

	<p>provide support such as therapy, advocacy and counselling in safe accommodation, including refuges. The New Burdens funding allocated to all local authorities amounts to £125 million.</p> <p>Local authorities are also now expected to create a domestic abuse local partnership board to provide advice to the local authority on its new responsibilities.</p> <p>Other important measures include support for children, as the new law explicitly recognises children as victims - particularly if they see, hear or experience the effects of abuse. It also places the guidance supporting the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (“Clare’s law”) on a statutory footing.</p>
<p>Support for Care Leavers/ Unregulated accommodation</p>	<p>In a press release in May 2021, the Education Secretary announced a £51 million funding boost to help thousands of vulnerable young people in the care system, and proposals to improve the quality of their accommodation.</p> <p>The support package will fund a range of schemes to support those that are either in or leaving care, as well as proposals to introduce national standards for accommodation settings for 16 and 17-year-olds. A consultation has been running in respect of this.</p> <p>These programmes include:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £33 million continued investment in ‘Staying Put’, which helps looked after children stay with their foster carers after their 18th birthday if they wish to. • £3.6 million to extend the ‘Staying Close’ pilot which gives extra support for young people leaving residential care, and £12 million for councils to continue to provide personal advisors to support care leavers up to the age of 25. • £2.7 million to provide intensive support to care leavers at high risk of homelessness, as part of the government’s Rough Sleeping strategy. <p>The Care Leaver Covenant Board has been working to improve the opportunities care leavers have access to as they proceed to independence and adulthood since its launch last year.</p> <p>This links to the announcement below regarding unregulated accommodation.</p>
<p>Unregulated accommodation</p>	<p>The number of children in care placed in unregulated settings has increased from 2,900 in 2009 to 6,490 in 2020. In February 2021 the Government announced that placing vulnerable children, aged under 16, in unregulated accommodation will be illegal from September 2021.</p> <p>The Government is seeking views on proposed standards for unregulated provision for looked after children and care leavers aged</p>

	<p>16 and 17.</p> <p>The Department for Education opened a consultation inviting views on:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the key indicators of whether a provider is delivering ‘care’ or ‘support’ • how best to define this provision in future and whether ‘supported accommodation for older children’ is the best descriptor • what the best provision in this sector looks like and therefore what needs to be accounted for in new national standards • a proposed suite of national standards • how settings should be regulated by Ofsted
PACE Bed Provision	<p>Response to, and outcomes for, children held overnight in Police custody? What are the challenges? How does the local authority work with partners?</p> <p><i>Suggestion from a Councillor - carried over from 2020/21.</i></p>
Locality Working	<p>Locality working has commenced in Newport and North Ormesby. What impact will, or has, this had on Children’s Services Care? Can locality working provide better focus of resources in these and other areas of the town?</p> <p><i>Suggestion from a Councillor – carried over from 2020/21.</i></p>
Task and Finish - Panel Member visits to service areas	<p>Small task and finish groups to undertake visits to various areas within Children’s Services, on a regular basis and to feed back to the Scrutiny Panel for information.</p> <p><i>Suggestion from the Chair</i></p>

Updates

Ofsted / Children’s Commissioner Updates	To continue to receive regular updates in relation to visits and findings of Ofsted and the Children’s Commissioner and on the progress of the Children’s Services improvement journey.
Covid Recovery	To continue to receive updates as and when appropriate in relation to Covid recovery in Children’s Services.

5. It should be noted that the topics outlined above are *suggestions* and the content of the Scrutiny Panel’s work programme is a decision for the Panel. When considering its work programme, the Panel is advised to select topics that are of interest to it, as well as topics that the Panel feels by considering, it could add value to the Local Authority’s work.
6. In addition to undertaking the agreed work programme, Scrutiny Panels have also previously responded on an ad-hoc basis to emerging issues - such as considering relevant new legislation, guidance or Government consultation documents. This approach occasionally results in further topics being identified for investigation or review throughout the year.

7. On occasion ad-hoc scrutiny panels may also be established throughout the year to undertake additional investigations, for example to examine areas of work which overlap more than one Scrutiny Panel.
8. The Scrutiny Panel is also advised that, under the terms of the Local Government Act 2000, local authorities have a responsibility of community leadership and a power to secure the effective promotion of community well-being. Therefore, in addition to the Scrutiny Panel's generally recognised powers (of holding the Executive to account, reviewing service provision, developing policy, considering budget plans and performance and financial monitoring), Panels also have the power to consider **any** matters which are not the responsibility of the Council but which affect the local authority **or** the inhabitants of its area. For example, nationally, local authorities have undertaken scrutiny work on issues such as post office closures, rural bus services, policing matters and flood defence schemes.

Scrutiny work plan prioritisation aid

9. Members may wish to use the aid attached at **Appendix 1** to prioritise issues where scrutiny can make an impact, add value or contribute to policy development.

PURPOSE OF THE MEETING

10. The Scrutiny Panel is asked to consider and agree its work programme for the 2021/22 Municipal Year. The Executive Director of Children's Services will be in attendance to assist the Panel by highlighting priority areas/issues and challenges and also to provide an overview of the structure within Children's Services.
11. When considering its work programme, the Scrutiny Panel is asked to ensure that topics agreed for inclusion:-
 - Affect a group of people living within the Middlesbrough area.
 - Relate to a service, event or issue in which the Council has a significant stake or over which the Council has an influence.
 - Are not issues which the Overview and Scrutiny Board or the Scrutiny Panels have considered during the last 12 months.
 - Do not relate to an individual service complaint; and
 - Do not relate to matters dealt with by another Council Committee, unless the issue deals with procedure.
12. It is suggested that the Scrutiny Panel has a mixture of working styles in its programme. This can include detailed and in-depth reviews, shorter topics, or one-off investigations.
13. Once the Scrutiny Panel has identified the areas of priority, support staff will draw those topics into a programme for approval by the Overview and Scrutiny Board.

RECOMMENDATION

14. That the Scrutiny Panel identifies the areas of focus/topics it would like to include in its work programme for 2021/22, for consideration/approval by the Overview and Scrutiny Board.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

15. Throughout the report, reference is made to documents published by Middlesbrough Council, Dfe, Ofsted, LGA, Gov.uk.

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Ofsted's Focused Visit

26th and 27th May 2021

Presentation:
Children's Social Care Scrutiny Committee

27th July 2021



MIDDLESBROUGH
CHILDREN
MATTER



**Our mission is to show
Middlesbrough children
that they matter.**

Context:

Ofsted's overall aim:

How has England's social care system delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the pandemic?

- For Middlesbrough that also means 'delivered **and continued to improve**'
- The same methodology as for the inspection in Nov/Dec 2019
- A look across the whole of Children's Services – all of social care and aspects of education and skills.
- 4 social care inspectors and 1 education inspector
- Prior to 2 days on site
 - We supplied Ofsted with documentation, performance information and answered queries.
 - Ofsted interviewed key personnel

COVID: Findings - Strategic

- Leaders invoked their major incident plan swiftly and effectively
- Established a framework for the identification and monitoring of vulnerable children in their communities
- Brought opportunities for different ways of working across the council – revitalising partnerships
- Weekly communications meetings with strategic partners to establish multi-agency pathways
 - School networks
 - Domestic abuse pathway – nationally evaluated
- Successful progress on much of improvement programme but some elements (inevitably) affected by COVID

COVID: Findings - Practice

- Some sws are creative and persistent in their engagement with children despite the restrictions imposed by the lockdown
- Staff have benefited from COVID safe-working practices and the deployment of technology to maintain their engagement of children and families.
- Despite the challenges of the last year staff report feeling supported, liked working for Middlesbrough and understood vision for change.
- The number of children who are Electively Home Educated has increased during the pandemic and there are effective systems to monitor EHE children.

Leadership

Leaders:-

- Positively engaged in a comprehensive programme of improvement
- Introduced
 - A comprehensive 'Audit for Excellence' framework.
 - 'Non – negotiables' – Practice Standards
- Have appropriately prioritised recruitment and the development of the workforce strategy
- Know that there remains significant variability in practice which is not meeting their own expectations regarding the quality of practice
- Do not yet have a sufficient understanding of children who are missing education

Main Findings - Positive

- Demand for a children's social care service has steadily increased over the last year.
- The MACH (front door) has continued to improve
- Case loads are reducing but remain too high for some social workers
- Children are seen regularly and direct work is demonstrably making a difference to their lives.
- Workers are persistent and build good relationships with children so interventions are more effective
- Personal Advisers maintain regular contact with care leavers
- Effective partnership work to identify exploitation risks and trends.
- SWs are increasingly working with children who have multiple and complex needs. This is as a result of a legacy of poor practice.

Main Findings – Areas for Improvement

- The quality of assessment and plans is variable and management oversight and supervision are not suitably evaluative
 - Children come into care when they need to but there is some delay in finding the right homes for them
- Page 22
- A lack of suitable foster placements & children's homes
- Too many care leavers not in education, employment or training
 - Children's identities and diverse needs are not given sufficient consideration
 - Some children experience too many change of social workers. Children told inspectors that they would like to have social workers who stayed with them for a long time.

One Children's Service

Education Matters:-

Significant focus on Children Missing Education

- Effective systems in place to monitor EHE children

Page 23 Insufficient knowledge of the circumstances of vulnerable children missing education so their needs are not met. This includes

- A minority of CLA are on reduced timetables or have no education for too long
- Some children with special educational needs do not receive a school place within the 20 day timescale
- A very small number of the above children attend unregistered provision on a part-time basis as their sole provision.

And Finally

New Recommendations – to improve

- Management oversight and actions to ensure that vulnerable children and children in care, including those with special needs and/or disabilities (SEND), receive their full educational entitlement

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The understanding of identity and the diverse needs of children and their families to inform assessment, planning and support

Overall – a positive outcome – we know ourselves and what more needs to be done.

Next Steps – Commissioner’s Report, Ofsted Monitoring Visit

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15 July 2021

Sue Butcher
Director of Children's Services
Middlesbrough Council
PO Box 505, 3rd Floor
Civic Centre
Middlesbrough
TS1 9FZ

Dear Ms Butcher

Focused visit to Middlesbrough children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Middlesbrough children's services on 26 and 27 May 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Jan Edwards, Victoria Horsefield, Alison Smale, Kathryn Grindrod and Michele Costello.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out remotely. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, carers, key stakeholders and young people. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

In addition to the serious and widespread weaknesses identified at the December 2019 inspection, the following areas for improvement were identified at this visit:

- Management oversight and actions to ensure that vulnerable children and children in care, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), receive their full educational entitlement.

- The understanding of identity and the diverse needs of children and their families to inform assessment, planning and support.

Findings

- Middlesbrough leaders invoked their major incident plan swiftly and effectively at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This established a framework for the identification and monitoring of vulnerable children in their local communities. The pandemic has brought opportunities for a different way of working across the whole council, which has revitalised partnerships. The director of children's care and director of education held weekly communication meetings with strategic partners to develop effective multi-agency pathways, such as weekly meetings with school networks, and the domestic abuse pathway which is being nationally evaluated.
- Since the inspection in December 2019, senior leaders have been positively engaged in a comprehensive programme of improvement. Leaders have a good understanding of what they have achieved and of what more there is to do. While they have been able to successfully progress much of their programme of improvement during the pandemic, the pace of change of some elements of the programme has been impacted by COVID-19. These elements have been incorporated into the year two plan for improvement. The director of children's services and the leadership team know that there remains significant variability in practice, confirmed by this visit.
- Leaders have introduced and built on a comprehensive audit to excellence programme, enhanced performance management, and demand forecasting. There are also new practice standards to provide clearer expectations or 'non-negotiables' about the quality of social work practice. An analysis of thresholds for intervention and capacity has led to an increase in children's cases that are now appropriately held at early help. This is beginning to have an impact on workloads but capacity remains a challenge across the service. Senior leaders know, through their own audits, that too much work remains of variable quality and is still being evaluated as poor and not meeting their own expectations regarding the quality of practice. The audit to excellence framework successfully builds in learning from audit, with clear links to individual team planning, wider service improvements and performance clinics. Social workers and early help practitioners provided inspectors with examples of how they had made positive changes to their practice as a result of their learning from audit.
- Demand for a children's social care service has steadily increased over the last year. Referrals from the police account for just under half of all referrals to children's social care, although only half of these lead to the need for a service. This means that too many families are being referred by the police when they do not meet the threshold for a statutory service. This is exacerbated by a lack of an internal police system for determining thresholds of need. Senior leaders are now working with the police to adopt a new early triage, although the police have been slow to engage in this development.

- The multi-agency children's hub (MACH) has continued to strengthen and build on the improvements that had been identified at the monitoring visit in August 2020. Children's risks and needs are identified through a thorough screening process that is timely and proportionate. An increase in repeat referrals which lead to a need for a service is adding to the demand. This is as a result of a legacy of poor practice and children's assessments and interventions failing to address all the presenting concerns and risks the first time that children are referred.
- When risks to children increase, strategy meetings in the MACH are well attended. The meetings consider information from all partner agencies, who jointly rate the risk to children to support appropriate decision-making about next steps. However, when risks to children who are already known to the service escalate, there is a less robust process for strategy meetings. Decision-making is not always informed by all the available information from key partners, such as health professionals, as well as the historical information known to children's social care.
- There is effective management oversight when children's cases are stepped down to early help, and clear direction for the early help practitioner at the start of their intervention.
- Children are seen regularly, and throughout the pandemic social workers have taken into account specific COVID-19 safety plans when planning their visits. Some social workers are creative and persistent in their engagement with children, despite the restrictions imposed by lockdown measures. This direct work with children is demonstrably making a difference to their lives.
- The quality of social workers' assessments of children's needs varies. The better assessments articulate children's wishes and feelings well and consider the changes needed to improve their circumstances. In the poorer assessments, the direct work with children is not contributing to a clear understanding of what life is like for them. The child's identity and diverse needs are not given sufficient consideration to add to an understanding of their lived experience, and do not help to inform decisions that are made about them.
- Plans for children that are made following an assessment of need also vary in quality. Children-in-need plans are not regularly updated and lack clear timescales, which hinders the monitoring of children's progress. The lack of contingency planning in some children's cases means that social work practice is crisis-driven, leading to unnecessary escalation of risks for children. Child protection plans are generally of better quality than children-in-need plans, although they are not always specific to each child in the family. Multi-agency core group meetings do not always proactively ensure that the plan is progressed to achieve timely improvements to children's circumstances. Management oversight and supervision are not sufficiently evaluative of children's progress to ensure that plans and interventions are making a difference for children.

- Legal gateway meetings have been strengthened and are evidencing tighter management oversight and monitoring of pre-proceedings work under the Public Law Outline. However, some of these changes are very recent and are not yet demonstrating impact. Decisions for ending pre-proceedings are sometimes made without the benefit of an updated assessment or without clear contingency planning. This can lead to the risk that these children will re-enter the same processes quickly or that they are not diverted effectively from the need for care proceedings.
- Social workers are increasingly working with children who have multiple and complex needs. This is as a result of a legacy of poor practice, including a failure to intervene quickly when children are experiencing cumulative neglect and deprivation, and the impact of drift and delay in planning. The judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service are positive about the engagement of senior leaders in addressing the poor practice that they have raised with them. This includes the poor quality of social work in legal planning, the evidence submitted and the legal advice provided. Senior leaders have responded to the challenges of the quality of work in pre-proceedings and court proceedings through the recent appointment of a court progression manager. However, this initiative is too new to demonstrate impact.
- The number of children who are electively home educated (EHE) and missing education has significantly increased during the pandemic. Leaders have effective systems in place to monitor EHE children. These children are visited quickly, with a follow-up visit by the education welfare officer if the plan for the child's education is not good enough. However, senior leaders do not have a sufficient understanding of the circumstances of vulnerable children who are currently missing education. For instance, a minority of children in care have been on reduced timetables or have had no educational provision for too long. Some of these are children with SEND and additional vulnerabilities and risks and therefore their needs are not met; some of these children do not receive a school place within the recommended 20-day timescale; and a very small number of these children attend unregistered provision on a part-time basis for their sole education provision.
- Strategic and operational partners work together effectively to identify exploitation risks and trends for children in their communities. The tracking of children who are at risk of or who are being exploited continues until the risk is sufficiently reduced. There are clear and comprehensive procedures in place for children who are missing from home or care. Workers are persistent and build good relationships with children, which ensures that the interventions provided are effective in reducing risk and episodes of children being missing from home or care.
- The small number of children inspectors looked at who had recently come into care did so when they needed to be looked after, and included young people who were homeless. However, for some children, there is delay in finding the right home for them. This is in part due to the lack of availability of suitable foster and

children's homes, and insufficient scrutiny of the longer-term appropriateness of placements with connected carers. As a result, some children experience disruption when they are initially placed with family carers and this adds to their experience of loss and instability.

- Some children experience drift and delay in being found a permanent home and in having their more complex needs met. Children's care plans and the review of these plans are not sufficiently detailed to ensure that children's needs are met as quickly as they should be. Furthermore, children's needs arising from their identity and culture are not fully considered in planning the support that they receive, and this is a significant gap.
- While children's physical health needs are well met, their emotional well-being and mental health needs are not always understood well enough. Services are identified but interventions are not tailored to individual need and this limits their effectiveness. This means that some older children continue to experience an escalation in trauma and anxiety, which impacts on their relationships, placement stability and education.
- It is positive that the number of vulnerable children living in unregistered children's homes has reduced in the last six months. There is robust senior management oversight for the small number of children and care leavers in unregulated placements.
- Personal advisers maintain regular contact with care leavers. They are creative in how they engage with care leavers if face-to-face visiting is not possible. However, pathway plans for care leavers are too vague and lack ambition in planning for their future. Plans to help them address their health issues can sometimes take too long to action. The location of a child and adolescent mental health services worker within the pathways service is having a positive impact on the mental and emotional health of the young people who access that support.
- Leaders acknowledge that there are still too many care leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). The recent introduction of a NEET clinic is starting to have an impact for care leavers. Care leavers who spoke to inspectors said that they appreciated the opportunities that their local authority apprenticeships have given them.
- Leaders have appropriately prioritised recruitment and the development of the workforce strategy. Although social workers' workloads are reducing, they remain too high for some social workers, particularly in the safeguarding and care planning and pathway teams. In addition, some children experience too many changes of social worker. Children told inspectors that, if they could change anything, they would like to have social workers who stayed with them for a long time. Too many changes of social worker affects relationship-building, as well as an understanding of children's circumstances and needs and the progression of children's plans.
- Staff have benefited from COVID-19 safe-working practices and the deployment of technology to maintain their engagement with children and families. Despite

the challenges of the last year, staff reported feeling well supported, and that they liked working for Middlesbrough and understood the vision for change.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Jan Edwards
Her Majesty's Inspector

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

AGENDA ITEM 8

**CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S SOCIAL CARE & SERVICES
SCRUTINY PANEL****27 July 2021****PROPOSED SCHEDULE OF MEETING DATES FOR THE
2021/2022 MUNICIPAL YEAR****PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

To agree the proposed schedule of meeting dates, for the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel, for the 2021/2022 Municipal Year.

Date	Time	Venue
Tuesday, 27 July 2021	4.00pm	Virtual
Monday, 13 September 2021	4.00pm	To Be Confirmed
Monday, 11 October 2021	4.00pm	To Be Confirmed
Monday, 22 November 2021	4.00pm	To Be Confirmed
Monday, 13 December 2021	4.00pm	To Be Confirmed
Tuesday, 18 January 2022	4.00pm	To Be Confirmed
Monday, 14 February 2022	4.00pm	To Be Confirmed
Monday, 21 March 2022	4.00pm	To Be Confirmed
Monday, 18 April 2022	4.00pm	To Be Confirmed

COUNCILLOR LEE GARVEY**CHAIR OF THE CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S SOCIAL CARE & SERVICES
SCRUTINY PANEL****Contact Officer:**

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