

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

**Date:** Monday 21st March, 2022  
**Time:** 4.00 pm  
**Venue:** Virtual

**Please note this is a virtual meeting.**

**The meeting will be livestreamed via  
the Council's YouTube channel at  
[Middlesbrough Council - YouTube](#)**

### AGENDA

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 21 February 2022 3 - 12
4. Developing a Council-wide approach to Children's Services - Guest Speaker  

Caroline O'Neill, LGA Improvement Advisor, will be in attendance at the meeting to address the Panel in relation to improving involvement and development of a Council-wide approach to Children's Services.
5. Update - Children's Services Improvement Programme 13 - 16  

The Executive Director of Children's Services will provide the Panel with an update on progress in relation to the Children's Services Improvement Programme, including the findings of the most recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit in December 2021.
6. Overview and Scrutiny Board Update  

The Chair will provide a verbal update on business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 22 February 2022.

7. Date and Time of Next Meeting - Tuesday, 26 April 2022 at 4.00pm
8. Any other urgent items which in the opinion of the Chair, may be considered.

Charlotte Benjamin  
Director of Legal and Governance Services

Town Hall  
Middlesbrough  
Friday, 11 March 2022

#### MEMBERSHIP

Councillors D Davison (Chair), T Mawston (Vice-Chair), A Hellaoui, T Higgins, 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](mailto: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 21 February 2022.**

**PRESENT:** Councillor Davison (Chair), Councillor Mawston (Vice Chair); Councillors: Hellaoui, Higgins, Uddin, and Wilson.

**OFFICERS:** C Breheny, L Blagg, S Butcher, J Dixon, G Field, J Pearce, J Tickle and M Walker.

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:** Sergeant J Sproson – North Ormesby Neighbourhood Police Team.

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** were submitted on behalf of Councillors Nugent and J Walker.

**\*\* DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

Name of Member	Type of Interest	Item/Nature of Interest
Councillor Davison	Non-pecuniary	Ag. Item 4 – Locality Working – Family member employed by Thirteen Housing

**MINUTES – 25 JANUARY 2022**

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel held on 25 January 2022 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

**LOCALITY WORKING FROM A CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERSPECTIVE – FURTHER INFORMATION**

The Chair welcomed those present and provided background in relation to the Panel's current scrutiny topic of Locality Working from a Children's Services perspective.

The Chair explained that the Panel had been provided with information in relation to various partners working within the locality pilot areas of Newport and North Ormesby and had subsequently heard from some of the partner services/organisations working within the localities - in relation to their involvement in locality working and how a multi-agency approach was working to improve outcomes for children and families.

The following representatives were in attendance at the meeting to speak about their involvement in locality working:-

- M Walker, Head of Stronger Communities
- L Blagg, J Tickle – Assistant Team Managers, Education and Partnerships
- Sergeant J Sproson – Cleveland Police (North Ormesby Neighbourhood Police Team)
- J Pearce – Neighbourhood Safety Manager

Overview of Locality Working in North Ormesby

M Walker, Head of Stronger Communities, was in attendance to provide the Panel with an overview of the locality working pilot in North Ormesby, on behalf of the North Ormesby Neighbourhood Development Manager, and also to provide clarification on several issues raised by Panel Members.

The Head of Stronger Communities highlighted that a more in-depth presentation had been circulated to the Panel with the agenda, containing background information to the pilot projects and information previously provided to the Panel. The presentation provided at the meeting had been condensed to focus on key questions/issues of most interest to the Panel.

Details of the governance structure for the standard locality working model were provided. It was noted that Strategic direction was provided by the Project Executive Board and Corporate Management Team made up of senior managers within the Council. A strategic Design and Implementation Group (DIG) was initially established until the projects were up and running and a Steering Group to monitor all locality Action Plans remained in place. The strategic direction fed into the operational direction and action planning via the Operational Locality Working meeting with Managers and Supervisors and the development of issue-based action plans within the locality teams. Finally, delivery and feedback was undertaken through the weekly or daily staff briefings with operational staff.

A list of some of the partners involved in both locality working pilots was provided and showed the wide range of Council Services and external partners working together in the localities, in addition to other bodies such as residents; schools; voluntary organisations; local businesses and faith groups.

The Panel was informed that each locality – North Ormesby and Newport – had nine Action Plans in place, with the aim being to improve life chances and life experiences.

One of those Action Plans was 'Better Outcomes for Children', with its key objectives being to create stronger families; increase educational attainment; reduce child sexual exploitation (CSE) and criminal exploitation and to reduce the numbers of children looked after.

It was highlighted that Children's Services staff had been in-situ virtually within the localities for some time, including dedicated Officers from Children's Social Care, Early Help and the Risk and Resilience teams. All attended weekly officer meetings and the Children and Families Working Group looking at key issues as they arose.

There were currently three Children's Care Social Workers allocated to North Ormesby and two Social Workers allocated to Newport. Staffing numbers were monitored, in terms of both Social Workers and Early Help Workers, to try to ensure there were sufficient numbers to deal with caseloads within both pilot areas.

All locality action plans had smart targets and actions were linked to the Performance Management Framework (PMF) indicators. These indicators were also used to monitor impact and progress.

The Children's Services Action Plan was led by a Senior Social Worker and was reviewed on a monthly basis. PMF indicators, whether negative or positive, were fed back to the Strategic group for further discussion/assistance and regular progress reports were produced for assurance purposes and for the Executive.

In terms of progress linked to locality working, the Panel was informed that public perception had improved within both localities. Surveys were carried out with residents in Newport and North Ormesby, initially in September 2020, with further surveys linked to indicators completed in March and September 2021. In relation to residents feeling safe, the results were as follows:-

<u>Newport</u>	<u>September 2020</u>	<u>March 2021</u>	<u>September 2021</u>
Feeling safe during the day	31.18%	35.49%	68.65%
Feeling safe after dark	9.68%	12.9%	48.98%
<u>North Ormesby</u>			
Feeling safe during the day	32.61%	51.51%	77.14%
Feeling safe after dark	13.04%	21.21%	31.42%

The Panel had raised several questions in relation to locality working, including identifying the main differences between the projects in Newport and North Ormesby.

It was explained that the programme sponsor was the Council's Chief Executive and during the process of establishing the locality working pilot he was keen to ensure that the pilot was not perceived as a Council project. Discussions were then held with Thirteen Housing and other Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to ascertain whether there was any interest in partnering with the Council to deliver the pilot. Thirteen Housing agreed to partner the Council and to part fund both of the locality Neighbourhood Managers.

North Ormesby already had an existing Neighbourhood Manager in post which was funded 50/50 by Thirteen Housing and Middlesbrough Council, therefore, this post was incorporated into the pilot model for North Ormesby. The post holder in North Ormesby had a Thirteen Housing contract of employment.

In Newport, when recruitment was undertaken for a Neighbourhood Manager, the successful candidate was already employed by Middlesbrough Council, therefore, the post holder had a Middlesbrough Council contract of employment.

The Panel had also enquired as to the timescales for the evaluation of the locality pilots and the methodology that would be used to undertake the evaluation.

The Panel was informed that the pilot projects would be evaluated using a number of means including community surveys, data analysis and case studies. Community surveys showed that there had already been a significant improvement in perceptions of safety in both localities (as previously mentioned above) and also that more people were indicating they intended to stay in the area for longer. On that note, in 2021, house prices in North Ormesby experienced the fastest increase than anywhere else in Teesside with an increase of 51% on the previous year.

A report on the evaluation of the pilots was being prepared and it was anticipated that it would be submitted to the Executive in June 2022.

The Panel had asked whether there was any data available on how many people locality working was reaching in both localities.

It was explained that this was difficult to answer as the outcomes the pilots aimed to achieve may impact on people who did not necessarily engage with staff, for example, improvements in environmental standards – the 'flying squad' worked across the full ward and everyone living near an area that had been improved would feel the benefit of those improvements, however, there may be no direct interaction with some of those residents. This did not mean that they had not been impacted by locality working. The locality team aimed to positively impact everyone living within the wards in some way.

The locality team also engaged with residents and businesses across the whole ward in both localities, including schools, community groups, voluntary sector organisations and youth outreach. The teams conversed with local business owners on a regular basis to ensure they were listened to and that their concerns were included in the action planning process. Social Workers, Early Help teams and public health colleagues also formed part of the locality teams and numerous Covid vaccine pop ups had been held in both areas which was another example of reaching the community through locality working.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- Reference was made to the Strategic oversight meetings giving strategic direction to the project and it was queried whether all of the partners attended those meetings. It was clarified that the strategic oversight meetings comprised of members of the executive management team (director level) within the Council. The wide range of partner services and organisations referred to during the presentation were well represented at the operational level meetings in both wards. As a result of Covid, meetings had been held virtually which enabled consistent communication with key partners. The Panel was reassured that such meetings were well

attended by each of the partners where their attendance was appropriate.

- A Panel Member highlighted that in some of the information previously presented to the Panel, there appeared to be some discrepancies in some of the groups and partners involved in each of the localities and it was queried whether there was a reason for this and whether both locality teams met with each other to share best practice. The Head of Stronger Communities advised that there was a slight difference in who attended the operational meetings in each locality based on demand analysis undertaken at the start of the projects. (Eg levels of crime, environmental issues, etc). This had provided a starting point as to which partners needed to be involved within the locality working teams and was reviewed regularly. The Head of Stronger Communities was responsible for oversight of both locality pilots and assured Members that each of the locality Neighbourhood Managers communicated with each other regularly and often attended each other's meetings in order to keep up to date with what was happening in each area. In summary, there would always be some differences between what was being delivered in each of the localities based on need.
- A Panel Member commented that locality working appeared to be working well and queried whether the Head of Stronger Communities felt it was working well overall. The Head of Service responded that she felt things were moving in the right direction despite a great deal of work still being required in both areas. The PMF in place had a raft of indicators which allowed the strategic group to examine whether the objectives, as originally set out in the project initiation document, were being met. Green shoots of improvement were certainly evident.
- In response to a query regarding selective landlord licensing, it was highlighted that, in relation to locality working, there was excellent engagement with the selective landlord licensing team and all of the partners working together was having a positive impact.
- In response to a query regarding the logistics of locality working, the Panel was advised that the aim of locality working was not to merge staff from existing teams together in a single team under one roof, but aimed to work as a collective from within their own departments. Staff such as Social Workers, Early Help Workers, Police and Street Wardens were liaising much more freely under the locality working model in ways they had not done previously.
- It was queried whether there would be an opportunity to roll out the locality model to other wards within the town. In response it was acknowledged that whilst there appeared to be a desire for locality working to be rolled out further, the North Ormesby and Newport projects were pilots and that outcomes and learning needed to be analysed which would form part of the pending evaluation report.
- Reference was made to North Ormesby having some of the highest rates in Middlesbrough for hospital admissions for self-harm, COPD, drug and alcohol related admissions and ambulance pick-ups. It was acknowledged that Public Health South Tees was a partner within the locality but, as all of these issues could impact on young people and their families, it was queried whether any GP practices or mental health care providers such as CAMHS were partners in locality working. The Panel was advised that the locality teams linked in with the Primary Care Network who had oversight of the GP practices. Whilst it was not considered necessary for GPs to attend locality operational meetings, it was felt that it should be ensured that the Neighbourhood Managers and other appropriate partners, were linking in to the Primary Care Network to ensure two-way communication of information. It was highlighted that the locality teams were strengthening links with other acute health providers such as the midwife and health visiting services.
- It was queried whether all partners would eventually work together in one building. It was stated that there was a move towards staff physically working from their offices, however, this was now on more of a 'blended working' basis (part of the time from the office, partly from home).
- A Member of the Panel wished to thank all those involved in the locality working model in both

North Ormesby and Newport and was aware of the positive impact the pilots were having within the communities.

Sergeant Sproson, Cleveland Police (North Ormesby Neighbourhood Police Team)

Sergeant Sproson, North Ormesby Neighbourhood Police Team, was welcomed to the meeting and provided the Panel with an insight as to how the policing team linked in with the Locality Team in North Ormesby.

The Panel was advised that, in general terms, the Neighbourhood Policing model operated across Middlesbrough on a similar basis to the locality working teams. In North Ormesby, the Locality Working Team and Neighbourhood Police Team complimented each other and relationships were enhanced by locality working.

A recent example of how well the arrangement was working was provided, relating to anti-social behaviour. There had been a spike in anti-social behaviour in North Ormesby between June and August 2021 when incidents had risen from approximately 35 per month to 50 incidents per month. This was due to a particular group of youths causing anti-social behaviour, disorder and criminal damage. The response through the Locality Team, predominantly with Selective Landlord Licensing and Neighbourhood Safety Officers, enabled information sharing, showing a joint approach. The Police had accompanied Council Officers whilst they had issued anti-social behaviour contracts and warnings and it showed offenders that the Police, PCSOs and Street Wardens were communicating with each other and working together, presenting as a united team. The Council had led on the Anti-Social Behaviour Contracts which enabled Police to concentrate on pursuing the offenders for crime, leading to prosecution and ultimately banning the ring-leader of the group from North Ormesby. This was one of the success stories as a result of the locality-based approach. Anti-social behaviour figures had dropped, from a peak of 50 events in June/July/August 2021, to single figures by January 2022.

Face to face feedback from residents that the Police engaged with, was very positive. This included parents of youths that had engaged in lower level anti-social behaviour, who were commenting that the area was a much nicer place to live and this was as a result of working together within the locality model.

The Police had ownership of the Action Plan 'making people feel safe'. It was acknowledged that anti-social behaviour played a big part in feeling unsafe, as did drugs. Mirroring the locality team, regular Multi Agency Response to Serious and Organised Crime (MARSOC) meetings were held to discuss intelligence and actions and how each of the partners could contribute to tackling serious and organised crime.

In addition, Police School Liaison Officers attended both primary schools in North Ormesby and delivered a six-week programme called 'Mini Police'. This included various activities, culminating in delivering an assembly to the whole school reinforcing messages around responsibility and not taking part in anti-social behaviour. The programme was also a good opportunity for the children to be introduced to the Neighbourhood Policing Team so that they could build up good relationships.

The Panel heard that the Policing Team had experienced some challenges over the last 18 months, which had been fed back to the locality group. These included the impact of Covid and extensive challenges with staffing. There had been dramatic cuts within the Police, however, officer numbers were slowly beginning to increase. There had been a high proportion of young probationary officers coming through that needed to be supported.

During the summer – tying in with the peak of anti-social behaviour and criminal damage issues in North Ormesby – the North Ormesby Neighbourhood team were often extracted from the area to be deployed elsewhere, however, those officers were now coming back to the team and figures for anti-social behaviour and crime were relatively low. It was acknowledged that there were areas of Middlesbrough with higher demand but Officers were remaining on duty in North Ormesby and not going to other areas which was essential to building relationships in the community and continuing

the good work in the area, including prevention work. Some of the ways to achieve this through Neighbourhood Policing was: targeted patrols, community engagement and problem solving. More locally, everything done in North Ormesby needed to be high visibility and high impact. The Action Plan was around making people feel safe. Whilst the Police could keep people safe, it was also important to make them feel that they were being kept safe.

In closing, Sergeant Sproson stated that there was a fantastic working relationship with all partners in the locality team, particularly Selective Landlord Licensing, Street Wardens and Neighbourhood Support Officers. Personal working relationships were strong and good results were being achieved and built on.

During a discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel Member referred to the perpetrators of anti-social behaviour and considered that they should be prosecuted but also supported to deter them from re-engaging in those behaviours. It was queried whether there was a profile of young people who may be likely to engage in anti-social behaviour in the future so that preventative work could be undertaken with them to deter them from committing anti-social behaviour and crime in future. Sergeant Sproson highlighted that, as part of the locality working approach, young people who had been involved in low level anti-social behaviour were invited to attend a presentation by youth workers to discourage them from engaging in such behaviours and to highlight the impact their behaviour had on others. This was carried out in conjunction with the youth offending service. Identifying and preventing was the reason the Police concentrated on primary schools with the mini police programme as the schools helped to identify the children that would benefit the most from taking part. Positive Pathways at North Ormesby was a youth club operating on Mondays and Thursdays for two age groups – 10-13 and 14-18s. In addition, when dealing with anti-social behaviour, the Council and Police had improved at identifying vulnerability and linking in with Social Services. Public Protection Notices were submitted to flag up issues between all partners, for example, to look at why was this child doing this? What was happening at home? Protecting young people from drugs was also an issue to be aware of and the potential of being vulnerable to criminal exploitation. Identifying vulnerability was something that the Police had improved upon in the last 3-5 years. There had been some success and this was now the time to build on this in North Ormesby and to prevent problems in the future.
- The Executive Director of Children's Services emphasised that the working relationship with the Police within the Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH) (front door to Children's Services) was very successful and information sharing was good. The Council had commissioned youth work at both universal and targeted levels. The organisations involved were Lynx, The Junction and Middlesbrough Football Club Foundation. The Youth Offending Service now had a preventative arm and were becoming more involved in prevention work around anti-social behaviour. Early Help was successful across Children's Services working with families to ensure they could grow and thrive. A problem profile was compiled by the Police across the Cleveland Police area which looked at the Organised Crime Groups and Anti-Social Behaviour groups which was useful in Chairing meetings with young people at significant risk. As there were known organised crime groups operating in Middlesbrough, it was key intervene with young people before they became involved.

The Chair thanked Sergeant Sproson for his attendance and the valuable information provided.

#### L Blagg and J Tickle, Assistant Team Managers, School Readiness

The Chair welcomed L Blagg and J Tickle, Assistant Team Managers for the Children's Centres and part of the School Readiness Team.

The Panel was advised that the main focus of the Children's Centres was to work with children aged 0-5 years and to register parents with the Centres in order to signpost them to information, advice and guidance. Those registered families would then become part of the Children's Centre's universal provision, including eligibility around potential funding for two-year-olds and 3-4 year olds,



healthy vitamins, health around the best start pathway. Those families coming through the best start pathway were worked with from birth to two years. Targeted interventions were delivered to identified families, for example, Chat, Play, Read, Sing was a programme of support for good literacy, also Play and Learn Together (where children had completed their two-year-old health review) which delivered key messages around supporting good home learning and reinforcing that family members were key educators.

Regular tracking and follow ups with families was undertaken, such as Achieving two year olds where families were entitled to 15 hours of free child care. The DWP provided data on which families were eligible for the provision and they were then contacted by the school readiness team and supported with seeking childcare in their area – highlighted what was available and how to access it.

Data in relation to the number of families being reached by the Children's Centre in both North Ormesby and Newport was contained within the briefing paper circulated with the agenda. The report showed:-

- North Ormesby Children's Centre reached 181 families in 2020, having made a total number of 5,700 contacts, and reached 245 families in 2021, having made 5,983 contact.
- West Middlesbrough Children's Centre (covering Newport ward) reached 628 families during 2020, with a total of 3,335 contacts and reached 878 families in 2021 from 3,345 contacts.
- Abingdon Children's Centre reached 462 families in 2020, with a total of 5,464 contacts, and reached 758 families in 2021 with a total of 10,493 contacts.

The report also provided data on the take up of nursery places in settings offering funded childcare to two, three and four year olds (universal and extended provision), for settings covering North Ormesby and Newport wards. It was noted that the figures might include children attending who lived outside of those wards.

Schools also offered universal 15 hours provision, increasing to 30 hours for eligible families of three and four year olds, but this data was not available.

The Panel heard that the challenges in terms of school readiness included cultural barriers, eg for some families it was not the cultural 'norm' to use childcare for two year olds, and both localities had high numbers of transient families.

Examples of working in a locality-minded way included working with colleagues from other services such as Selective Landlord Licensing and Neighbourhood Safety. Where colleagues had their own agenda for visiting families, wherever possible, the Children's Centres liaised with those services to ensure opportunities were not missed to identify under-fives who may not be registered with the Children's Centre so that families were not missing out on information advice and guidance and to encourage and help families to understand the benefits of their children accessing education from a young age.

The impact of locality working on school readiness predominantly related to better information sharing to ensure families were aware of what was available and how to access it and it also provided a good networking opportunity, raising awareness of local issues and breaking down cultural barriers within the community.

During Covid, the Children's Centres had continued to offer an increased amount of support within Newport and North Ormesby. The Children's Centre covering Newport was physically based at Whinney Banks, West Middlesbrough. Pre-covid there were many activities taking place in the Centre but it was difficult for families to get there. Since Covid the majority of provision was delivered digitally and families were being contacted by telephone, WhatsApp and other platforms which had increased accessibility for families and was working very well.

In response to a query regarding working relationships between the Children's Centres and Health Visiting service, the Panel was advised that the Children's Centres worked closely with Health

Visiting colleagues and had shared pathways and pro-actively followed up statutory contacts to focus on the learning and development of the child and supporting the parents in doing this. In terms of the locality working, it was more about networking with colleagues and making them aware of how they could support information sharing about the Children's Centres. In Newport there were many non-English speaking families so it was important to let families know about eligibility for nursery places.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance and the information provided.

#### J Pearce, Community Safety Manager

J Pearce, Community Safety Manager, was in attendance at the meeting to provide the Panel with a brief overview of how the Street Warden service fitted into the locality working model and how they supported colleagues within Children's Services.

As mentioned previously by the Children's Centre Assistant Team Managers, Street Wardens had continued to carry out 'door knocking' during Covid and had supported various Teams with intelligence gathering and information sharing. The Neighbourhood Safety Team, as a whole, had an excellent relationship with Children's Services and worked closely with them right across the town, however, the Community Safety Manager felt that locality working enhanced this.

The Panel was informed that the Street Wardens regularly supported partners with intelligence gathering within the community and were the eyes and ears on the ground, gaining a lot of information which other services would not be privy to. Meetings held with Police and Children's Services looked at vulnerable young people including those who go missing from home. At daily Police briefings, all incidents that had occurred within the last 24 hours were examined, including vulnerable young people considered to be at risk of harm who went missing on a regular basis. Key information was distributed amongst the Street Wardens together with photographs which allowed the Wardens to gather information on contacts and properties visited by those young people and reported back to appropriate partners. This flagged up risks with partners so that appropriate actions and interventions could be put in place.

Street Wardens regularly responded to home visits with Children's Services. Joint visits were often undertaken with Street Wardens and Neighbourhood Safety Officers to provide protection to staff but to also develop relationships with young people and families to help keep them safe in the community.

Street Wardens regularly attended organised youth groups across Middlesbrough but particularly in Newport and North Ormesby there had been a great deal of targeted outreach work to help divert young people away from crime and disorder.

Wardens used the locality bases every day whilst on operational patrol and were able to feed information and intelligence directly to partners in real time and took task directions from partners in response to this. Locality working helped to speed up responses to the community's needs.

Wardens had been involved in a range of projects that had been developed through the locality teams such as litter picks, back alley makeovers, weeks of action in relation to organised crime and drug activity whereby information was passed to Police for action. From a community safety perspective, locality working had had a significant impact in both localities and had enhanced relationships by bringing together operational staff on a regular basis for key information sharing and development of action plans. This allowed a more targeted and focussed service to be delivered to the community.

The Chair queried whether much of the work undertaken in the communities was as a result of residents directly attending the locality hubs/base. The Community Safety Manager responded that a lot of reports came in from members of the public through emails and phone calls and also through councillors via the one stop system, but the real time intelligence coming into the hubs had really helped to improve responses to the needs of the community.

The Chair thanked the Officer for attending and the information provided.

The Chair requested that Panel Members contact her directly, or the Democratic Services Officer, with any suggestions for further evidence considered necessary in relation to the Panel's current review.

**AGREED** that the information provided be noted and considered in the context of the Panel's current scrutiny review.

### **COVID RECOVERY IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

The Executive Director of Children's Services advised that Covid infection rates continued to decrease in the lead up to half term. For Children's Social Care, it was very much business as usual. Ofsted were moving to face to face monitoring visits, rather than virtual, in the near future.

Schools were examining the impact of disruption to learning caused by Covid and this was impacting on workloads.

It was highlighted that there had been a high number permanent school exclusions, with the period September 2021 to date, being higher than the whole of the previous year. Attendance and oversight of vulnerable children (those children with a Social Worker) remained a key priority for the Council.

The Safeguarding Partnership continued to implement the challenges outlined in a letter from the DfE entitled 'Keeping Children Safe in Winter' which was about ensuring and monitoring the re-engagement of vulnerable children in education. It was confirmed that processes were in place in relation to this and that attendance for vulnerable children was improving. There was currently no cause for concern.

As the end of Covid restrictions were imminent, the Panel was asked whether it was happy to receive Covid recovery updates at every other meeting, rather than every meeting, unless there was a particular issue that needed to be reported. There would be focus on vulnerable children, supporting families, with locality working being a key part of school readiness. The importance of the Street Wardens engaging with some of the most disenfranchised young people was immeasurable.

A Panel Member commented that it was very concerning to hear that there had been more permanent exclusions since September than in the whole of the previous year. It was acknowledged that keeping these children safe was a priority but also keeping them educated as they had already experienced disruption to their education through Covid. It was queried whether there was a profile of the children who had been excluded and whether there were sufficient staff to support those children who were not being educated in school places.

The Executive Director advised that excluded pupils should receive 25 hours of education per week within six days of exclusion and it was acknowledged that this was putting pressure on the Council's approved provision. There were ongoing conversations to ascertain the reasons why children had been excluded and why on a permanent basis, rather than fixed term. Schools had many issues to deal with including the impact of Covid on older children in terms of mental health. Whilst there were pressures in the system, staff were working hard to ensure children were getting as solid an education as possible.

Concern was expressed that those excluded children entitled to 25 hours education provision, were less likely to engage in this provision and may be falling further behind. The Executive Director assured Members that those who had been excluded would be provided with an alternative education provider and not left to drift. It was acknowledged that some of the children were vulnerable and that an update could be provided in the future and the most appropriate route for that would be discussed outside of the meeting.

**DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel was scheduled for Monday, 21 March 2022 at 4.00pm.

The Chair made reference to a recent LGA workshop she had attended in relation to a whole-Council approach to Children's Services and highlighted that she would like to invite one of the speakers to attend a future meeting of the Scrutiny Panel.

31 January 2022

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

Dear Sue

### **Monitoring visit to Middlesbrough children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Middlesbrough children's services on 14 and 15 December 2021. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2020. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Neil Penswick and Russel Breyer.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Children in need.
- Children subject to a child protection plan.
- Children subject to a letter before proceedings and the quality and impact of pre-proceedings intervention.

The visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out remotely at the request of the local authority. 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. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff and managers.

### **Headline findings**

Senior managers know their service well and have a realistic understanding of their progress since the 2020 Ofsted inspection. Improvements in auditing give them accurate information on what they still need to do. Social work capacity has increased and there has been a strong focus on improving compliance with national guidance. Senior managers are now working to further improve the quality of social work practice. Currently, the progress of children in need and those subject to a child

protection plan remains variable, as the quality of planning is weak and there is insufficient focus on the lived experience of children. Case management oversight is not sufficiently robust to ensure that issues are addressed. Senior managers are aware of these issues and have plans in place to address them.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

The Director of Children's Services and senior managers know their services well. They had prepared a detailed self-evaluation focused on the areas subject to this monitoring visit and prior to inspectors' on-site activity. This accurately described the improvements they had made in their services and the areas that needed further development.

The Ofsted inspection report published in January 2020 identified that all aspects of children's services were inadequate. Since then, senior managers have focused successfully on improving the capacity of their staff in respect of their services to children in need and subject to a child protection plan. This includes decreasing the size of social worker caseloads, employing more permanent qualified and experienced staff and creating smaller teams to improve management oversight. The permanent senior management team has also improved its line of sight through direct casework involvement and through participation in oversight panels, resulting in a better understanding of the quality of work and what further needs to occur to address the deficits in practice.

A particular strength is the auditing process which provides a wide and in-depth coverage of the quality of services. The audits focus well on gaining an understanding of children's day-to-day experiences and make judgements on how effective social work and management oversight have been on addressing children's needs. Work is ongoing to enhance front-line managers' and independent reviewing officers' skills as auditors. There is a robust moderation process which enables senior managers to review the audits and identify actions that need to be completed.

Over the past 18 months, senior managers have successfully focused on improving compliance and ensuring that essential activities are occurring. This includes ensuring that children are allocated to social workers who have the time and professional space to work with them. The frequency of visits for children in need and child protection purposes has improved. Social work supervision takes place regularly, but is not yet leading to good enough reflection or challenge. The frequency of multi-agency planning groups, and the timeliness of initial and review child protection conferences, have also improved.

Senior managers are working to a detailed improvement plan for all of their services. This includes appropriately focusing on improving the quality of social work practice through increased training and learning opportunities. Individual learning for workers and managers is identified, and wider themes are addressed. The local authority's own audits show an improving performance in the quality of practice. However, 20%

of social work practice continues to be judged in the audits as inadequate due to poor-quality practice which is not sufficiently addressing the concerns and progressing casework

During this visit, inspectors saw no child at immediate risk of harm or in need of urgent action. This is a significant improvement since the last Ofsted inspection. However, too many children continue to experience delays in progressing their plans. Key weaknesses are that plans, and planning, are not focused and lack timescales relevant to the child. There is insufficient focus on the lived experience of children, and social work tools are not being fully utilised to understand patterns of behaviours and cumulative risk. For some children, this results in them remaining for too long in situations either where their needs are not being met or where longer-term concerns are not sufficiently addressed.

Despite the work that has been done to improve one-to-one supervision, in the main these essential meetings are not sufficiently driving improvements including reviewing all the issues, identifying actions, and making sure that these are happening. Recording of management decision-making is too limited to enable an understanding of why actions are taken.

Senior managers have been working on improving the monitoring and oversight of pre-proceedings work. While positive steps have been taken, including appointing an officer to oversee this work and further developing a tool to track children in the process, management oversight does not always lead to the identification of what needs to change and ensure that this happens.

For some children, child protection thresholds have not been consistently implemented. While inspectors found improvements in the immediate response to child protection concerns, some families find themselves subject to statutory child protection planning when it is not needed. There is evidence of a risk-averse culture. For example, some families who need support but work well with the social workers and other agencies are nevertheless subject to child protection planning. Inspectors also identified a small number of families where safety plans were in place when a child's case was closed to children's social care. In these cases, other support packages would be more appropriate.

As senior managers identified, inspectors did see some examples of good social work focused on improving outcomes. For these children, there was good effective working relationships with the parents, good observations, meaningful direct work and well-focused planning and management oversight. The improvement work by Middlesbrough Council has also resulted in a stronger practice when there are immediate safeguarding issues, and in the support for children in need where there are serious concerns and they are on the edge of coming into care.

All of the social workers that met inspectors on this visit knew their children and families well, and have an enthusiasm and passion for working with them and

improving their lives. They spoke positively about the support provided by senior staff, their managers and peers during the COVID-19 lockdowns. They also reported how children's services have been improving and how they are better supported to do their work.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Neil Penswick  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**