

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

A meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was held on Wednesday 8 September 2021.

PRESENT: Councillors M Saunders (Chair), D Coupe, A Hellaoui, C Hobson, D McCabe, C McIntyre, J Platt, M Storey, J Thompson and S Walker

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillors

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: A Preston (The Mayor) (The Mayor and Lead Member for Children's Social Care, Adult Social Care and Public Health)

OFFICERS: C Breheny, S Butcher, T Parkinson, G Cooper, A Perriman, S Blood and A Hoy

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors T Mawston, A Bell and L Garvey

20/27 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest received at this point in the meeting.

20/28 **MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD - 28 JULY 2021**

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 28 July were submitted and approved as a correct record.

20/29 **MAYOR'S ATTENDANCE AT OSB**

The Mayor / Executive Member for Adult Social Care and Public Protection and Lead Member for Children's Safeguarding, Mayor Andy Preston, was in attendance to update the Board on his aims and aspirations, progress made to date and to highlight any emerging issues relating to his portfolios.

The following officers were also in attendance: the Executive Director of Children's Services; the Director of Adult Social Care and Health Integration; and the Director of Public Health.

As part of his update to the Board, the Mayor discussed his portfolio under three areas – Children's Services, Adult Services and Public Protection and Mayoral.

Children's Services

- In the past Middlesbrough children were let down and it was the most vulnerable and most precious that were let down. Over two years ago OFSTED had deemed Middlesbrough's Children's Services' Department inadequate and there had been several options open to the Government.
- The Mayor advised that today, from all of the information he had available he was reassured that our Children's Services Department was now heading in the right direction. The Commissioner appointed to work with our Children's Services Department had recently recommended to the Government Minister that our Children's Services Department remain under the Council's control and an imminent decision from the Minister was anticipated.
- The Mayor expressed the view that in the future he believed Middlesbrough's Children's Services Department could be a beacon of good practice and set national standards.
- An area where improvement was needed was in the number of children absent from school. In any one day 10 per cent of Middlesbrough children

were absent and this figure was not evenly spread throughout the towns demographic. This figure was far worse than the national average. The 10 per cent was frequently concentrated on those that needed the most from education including the role models, learning and social interaction. Improvement in this area was a real priority.

- The staff in Children's Services had been fantastic over the last two years and it was acknowledged that there would always be some agency staff. However, dependency on agency staff was reducing. Huge strides had been made under the current Executive Director of Children's Services leadership.

Following the update in respect of Children's Services, Members were afforded the opportunity to ask questions.

A Member enquired as to the number of children currently in care in Middlesbrough, as previously these numbers had been in the 700's. It was also queried as to how the Council was performing in terms of Social Worker recruitment and retention. The Executive Director of Children's Services advised that the numbers of looked after children in Middlesbrough had decreased significantly. In the period since August 2020 the number had reduced to 539, a reduction of approximately 160 children, which was significant progress. It was advised that some of those children should never have been in our care. OFSTED had previously commented in their inspection, almost two years ago, that Middlesbrough was not moving children to their forever homes as swiftly as was needed. Children were now being moved onto their adoptive homes, they had also been a number of children who were placed at home on Care Orders with parents, whereby the local authority had parental responsibility and these had taken time to work through but great progress had been made. It was emphasised that the number of children looked after in Middlesbrough would always be higher than the national average, owing to Middlesbrough's unique circumstances. However, the number of children looked after would continue to decrease. It was advised that the numbers would come down more slowly now.

In terms of the numbers of Social Workers it was advised that the department had a Workforce Development Strategy and within that there was a recruitment and retention drive. A new website had been developed and the link would be forwarded to Members of the Board, which was focussed on recruiting experienced Social Workers. The aim was to bring the figures down to 15 per cent agency Social Workers and that was in line with the national benchmark. It was advised that this was being tracked on a six weekly basis by LMT. The exact percentage was unknown at this stage but this would be forwarded to the Board. It was acknowledged that this was a national issue but that significant efforts were being made to ensure Middlesbrough was an employer of choice.

A Member of the Board made reference to the increase in the number of children that were now being cared for by in-house Foster Cares and had returned to Middlesbrough, which could only be beneficial for the children. The Mayor advised that the number of looked after children being placed out of area had been reduced and baring exceptional circumstances the aim was for all Middlesbrough children to be cared for in Middlesbrough. The Executive Director of Children's Services echoed these comments and made the point that when children and young people were away from Middlesbrough and went missing they generally returned to Middlesbrough, as this was where they felt comfortable. Finding agency residential placements was extraordinarily difficult and Middlesbrough was developing its own provision, including building our own facilities and refurbishing / maximising our own residential Children's homes. There was a general drive to use our own resources. Reference was made to the proxy indicators that had been developed for the department, one of which was the reduction in the number of young people in external residential care and these would be provided to the Board.

In response to a query it was advised that the average case load per Social Worker in Middlesbrough was 19.9 FTE, which was a slight increase from 19.2 in June and a decrease from the high experience in October 2020 when it was 24.3. The highest caseloads were 26.4 per cent had 16-20 on their caseload and 2.6 per cent had 21-25 children open. 15.4 per cent had 26-30. One of the highest caseloads at the moment was in the Children with Disabilities Team. Caseloads in Early Help were too high at the moment, they were 31 children per worker, higher than the service target. The service was therefore working with more children at an early help level but there was a need to encourage partner agencies to become the lead professional in working with those children. Schools were a lead partner for a considerable number of children at the early help level but there was a real need to support health to undertake this role more. It was also acknowledged that post COVID demand was high for Children's Services across the board was high.

Adult Services, Public Protection and Public Health

- Reference was made to the Best Possible Start in Life and the importance of this as a key strategic priority.
- Building on the strengths of a Dementia Friendly Middlesbrough and the need to support carers in their role, as well as creating Age Friendly Communities.
- Reference was made to drugs, substance misuse and alcoholism and the Mayor expressed the view that drugs was the single biggest issue faced by the town. Although these problems were not unique to Middlesbrough the scale of the problem locally meant that Middlesbrough faced a challenging situation. Dealing with these issues via an integrated model of support for vulnerabilities of all kinds in one place would have a ripple effect across the town.
- A focus on recovery was a stated priority and many people did recover from addiction, a focus on employment and community integration was key in overcoming the challenges posed.
- The Mayor expressed the view that Department of Adult Social Care, Public Protection and Public Health was a very well managed directorate and for the scale of the challenges the town faced the Department performed very well.

Following the update in respect of Adult Services, Public Protection and Public Health, Members were afforded the opportunity to ask questions.

A Member made reference to the Heroin Addicted Treatment (HAT) programme currently delivered in the town and whether he was in favour of such programmes. The Mayor expressed the view that it was a good project, despite it being controversial, however the evidence was there that it did have a role and that the programme could help to reduce crime and help individuals recover. It also had a ripple effect on members of their family and wider community. It was not the answer to everything but there were some candidates that would benefit.

Reference was made to the backlog in hospital appointments and whether a proactive approach could be taken to offer drop-in style centres for particular ailments. The Mayor expressed the view that he was in favour of such provision and there would be a huge challenge ahead with advanced cancers and heart problems if early screening was not prioritised.

In response to a query on the proposed additional 1p on income tax to help pay for Adult Social Care the Mayor expressed the view that there was something wrong when an individual of modest means is forced to pay for care when someone who had not been as frugal was receiving it for free. In an ideal world all care would be free but currently that was a step too much too soon and therefore there was a need to scale it in, to enable people to have more assets in their house was the right thing. There had to be a line somewhere and the Government's move was a step in the right direction.

The Director of Adult Social Care and Health Integration advised that as a local

authority Middlesbrough had relatively few people who funded all of their own care. Middlesbrough had high percentage of people for who the local authority paid a contribution or funded the whole cost of an individual's care. The Government was changing the threshold so that anyone with over £23,000 would pay for their own care whereas in the future anyone with over £100,000 would be paying for all of their own care. The Government had also introduced a cap whereby no one would pay more than £86,000 for their care over their lifetime. Work would therefore need to be undertaken to establish what formulas would be applied in respect of the money allocated to individual local authorities by Government in the future and how this would impact on Middlesbrough financially.

Mayoral

- Over the last two years there had been an attempt to revitalise the centre of town because if the town centre continued to decline every single resident in every area of Middlesbrough would feel the financial and social consequences.
- The Mayor advised that he had been extremely focussed on trying to protect the jobs in retail, bring in other new jobs and reduce the need to build on Greenfield sites. Within 2 years from now there would be 1000 new homes in the central areas of Middlesbrough including the edges of Grove Hill, as well as more offices that would be full and vibrant; allowing businesses to grow.
- In addition extraordinary leisure facilities would also be developed that would attract people into the town centre on evenings and weekends. Leisure that would appeal to all different types of people. Despite COVID this would emerge.
- The Mayor advised that his mission for the next two years was to let people in communities know that Middlesbrough Council was a compassionate, caring organisation that was here for them, as well as to make people feel appreciated and supported.

Members were afforded the opportunity to ask questions.

A Member made reference to the already high level of Middlesbrough's Council Tax collection arrears and asked the Mayor for his views on this issue. In response the Mayor advised that Middlesbrough would always be challenged in respect of this issue. However, the Council had adopted a new approach through the Stop the Knock Campaign and had stopped using Bailiffs to collect Council Tax. The rate of people in arrears had declined since the new approach had been adopted. In addition the Council had undertaken work with the ethical lettings company to help tenants through difficult times. The Mayor expressed the view that none payment of Council Tax was not acceptable and intelligent ways to work with people to encourage them to pay had been adopted.

In respect of the recently approved £1m investment by the Executive to bring 125 empty homes in the town up to standard it was queried how the Mayor envisaged the scheme would work and if the funding allocated would be sufficient. The Mayor advised that in some areas there were a number of boarded up properties that needed to be dealt with, as they caused huge issues for people living on those streets. Often the properties were owned by absentee landlords and they needed to be made habitable in order to improve our local streets for all of the residents and generate income from the Council. The Mayor acknowledged that it was unknown as to whether £1m would be a sufficient level of funding to bring 125 homes up to standard but it would be a good starting point.

The view was expressed by a Member of the Board that there was also a need to improve the business / commercial stock in Middlesbrough. The Mayor acknowledged this suggestion and stated that in his view there was a need to name and shame those that failed to take action to ensure their business / commercial properties were not left in a state that brought Middlesbrough down and impacted negatively on people's mental and physical health. Action was being taken in respect of this issue and discussions were ongoing about the various options open to the local authority.

The Chair thanked the Mayor and officers for their attendance and contributions to the meeting.

AGREED that the information provided be noted, and the agreed action be undertaken.

20/30 **SCRUTINY CHAIRS UPDATE**

The Scrutiny Chairs/Vice Chairs provided updates in respect of the work undertaken by their respective panels since the last meeting of the Board.

NOTED

20/31 **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL - FINAL REPORT - BEHAVIOUR, DISCIPLINE & BULLYING IN SCHOOLS**

The recommendations to be submitted to the Executive were:

- a) In respect of the new Inclusion, Assessment and Review Service and the 'Team Around the School' approach, that:
 - i. a full and comprehensive evaluation is undertaken, which takes into account the impact of COVID-19 and the risk management controls currently in place within schools; and
 - ii. the key findings, outcomes and outputs of the evaluation are reported to the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel, including feedback received from children and young people.
- b) That the Local Authority holds schools to account more transparently for their exclusion rates by:
 - i. monitoring, analysing and recording exclusion data at a school-level;
 - ii. undertaking regular focussed visits to those schools with high rates to assist with putting measures in place to reduce fixed-term and permanent exclusions; and
 - iii. reporting exclusion data to the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel on a 6 monthly basis.
- c) That, where exclusion rates are high, the Local Authority:
 - i. provides an enhanced bespoke package of support to assist schools in identifying and meeting the needs of children with SEND and additional vulnerabilities; and
 - ii. delivers training to demonstrate the detrimental impact of exclusion on a pupil's life and life chances.
- d) That the Local Authority shares good practice with schools by facilitating peer reviews and providing case study illustrations of good behaviour management practices.
- e) That a guidance document is developed and circulated to schools on the importance of language and its influence on changing perceptions and attitudes.
- f) That schools are encouraged to undertake an anonymous survey of staff and students about their views on behaviour, discipline and bullying and that feedback is utilised to improve behaviour management practices.

AGREED that the findings and recommendations of the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel be endorsed and referred to the Executive

20/32 **EXECUTIVE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chief Executive submitted a report which identified the forthcoming issues to be considered by the Executive, as outlined in Appendix A to the report. The report provided the Overview and Scrutiny Board with the opportunity to consider whether any item

contained within the Executive Forward Work Programme should be considered by the Board, or referred to a Scrutiny Panel.

NOTED

20/33

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S UPDATE

The Chief Executive was in attendance and provided an update to the Board in respect of the following:-

- COVID-19 update
- Executive decisions, August
- Reoccupation

In terms of the latest local COVID-19 data, as at 6 September 2021 the rolling seven-day rate of cases per 100k of the Middlesbrough population was as follows:

- 92 new cases had been added to the system on 6 September 2021;
- 558 new cases had been diagnosed in the last seven days;
- 395.8 rate per 100k of population (last seven days); and
- 290.10 COVID-19 deaths per 100k population.

Reference was made to the vaccination rates and to date 66.2% of over 18's in Middlesbrough had received 2 doses of the vaccine. This compared with 84.4 % in Northumberland, which had the highest rate in the North East region. It was emphasised that the uptake rates by Council area did not take account of the age demographics. Once deprivation and BAME was considered, it became more difficult for Middlesbrough to match Northumberland.

In terms of vaccination by age range 13.2 % of young people in Middlesbrough aged 15 to 18 had received 2 doses of the vaccine and the vaccination rates increased with age. For example, 86.7 % of people aged 55 to 59 in Middlesbrough had received 2 doses of the vaccine and 90.7 % of people aged over 90 had received their 2 doses.

In relation to the Executive decisions scheduled taken in July it was noted that a number of reports had been considered. These included; a report on Community Engagement; a Corporate Debt Management Policy; the Surveillance Policy and Children's Improvement Plan.

In respect of the reoccupation of Council buildings by staff it was advised that these arrangements would be finalised in September and that a phased reoccupation was planned. Reoccupation would commence from 4 October 2021 – subject to no major increase in transmission following the return of schools – within the context of blended working and on a phased basis, over the period October to December 2021.

Following the update, Members were afforded the opportunity to ask questions.

A Member of the Board queried whether COVID testing sites were still operating in Middlesbrough. The Chief Executive advised that all of the sites were still operational and in the 7 days between the 24th and 31st August over 2,500 people in Middlesbrough had used those sites. It was also queried as to how long the testing sites would remain in place and it was advised that this information would be brought back to the next meeting of the Board.

In terms of the availability of vaccinations for students, at both Teesside University and the local colleges, it was queried as to whether any walk-in provision for students to have their vaccines was available at these sites. The Chief Executive advised that Teesside University had specific arrangements in place for their students and had utilised some of their dedicated space to provide COVID vaccinations throughout the pandemic. In respect of the college, which was drawing in students from across Teesside the arrangements were slightly different. However, on recruitment days and open days the Melissa Bus had been located at the colleges, walk-in appointments were available and this approach was set to continue.

A Member queried whether any thought had been given to the fact that infection rates

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elsewhere in the country were increasing and last year around October time the rates had increased in Middlesbrough substantially. The Chief Executive advised that Middlesbrough should not relax in terms of COVID, as the town's rates were high but it was unknown how transmission rates would play out over the next few months. In terms of risk there was a significant proportion of the town's adult population who had not been vaccinated and a significant proportion whose immunity may wane over the next few months. In addition, the availability of staff and vaccines over the next few months was unknown, schools had only recently returned and winter time was coming up when flu would be more prevalent. It was emphasised that Middlesbrough needed to remain fixated on COVID otherwise potentially the town would face similar issues to last year. It was likely that all of these factors combined would result in an increase rather than decrease in the future prevalence rates of COVID.

The Chair thanked the Chief Executive for his attendance and contribution to the meeting.

NOTED