

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

A meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was held on Wednesday 22 January 2025.

PRESENT: Councillors I Blades (Chair), J Kabuye (Vice-Chair), J Banks, D Branson, E Clynch, D Coupe, J Ewan, L Lewis, I Morrish, M Saunders, Z Uddin and G Wilson

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillors L Henman (Executive Member for Children's Services)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: D. Hodgson (Local Democracy Reporter)

OFFICERS: J Dixon, D Alaszewski, J Tynan and L Grabham

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors B Hubbard and M McClintock

24/55 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Name of Member	Type of Interest	Nature of Interest
Councillor Clynch	Non-pecuniary	Agenda Item 6.1(i) – Member of Levick Trust.
Councillor Ewan	Non-pecuniary	Agenda Item 6.1(i) – Member of Levick Trust.

24/56 **WELCOME AND FIRE EVACUATION PROCEDURE**

The Chair welcomed those present and advised that as there were no scheduled tests, should the fire alarm sound, attendees should evacuate the building via the nearest fire exit and assemble at the Bottle of Notes opposite MIMA.

**** SUSPENSION OF COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE No. 4.13.2 – ORDER OF BUSINESS**

The Chair proposed that there be a change to the order of business in the agenda of the meeting in accordance with the Constitution paragraph 4.30.1 (c), to deal with Agenda Item 6.1(i) as the final item of business and that Members would be asked to consider passing a resolution to exclude the press and public from the meeting, prior to the item being heard due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

ORDERED that, in accordance with Council Procedure Rule No. 4.57, the Board agreed to vary the order of business to deal with the items in the following order: Agenda Items 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, then Agenda Item 6.1(i).

24/57 **MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD - 18 DECEMBER 2024**

The Minutes of the previous meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 18 December 2024 were submitted and approved as a correct record, subject to the word 'singed' being amended to 'signed' at page 5.

24/58 **EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE - CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

Councillor Henman, Executive Member for Children's Services, was in attendance at the meeting, accompanied by J Tynan, Executive Director of Children's Services, and D Alaszewski, Director of Children's Care, to provide the Board with an overview of his portfolio in relation to Children's Services.

The Executive Member introduced himself, advising the Board that he was elected as a

Councillor for Acklam Ward in July 2024 and was appointed as Executive Member for Children's Services in November 2024. He had previously been an employee of Middlesbrough Council and currently worked for a housing association.

Members were provided with an outline staffing structure for Children's Services, naming the following Teams that sat within the Children's Care area of the directorate:-

- Early Help
- MACH and Assessment
- Safeguarding and Care Planning and Children with Disabilities
- Children in Care, Care Leavers and Fostering
- Residential Resource and Supported Accommodation
- Learning, Review and Development

Headline figures for Children's Services included:-

- 658 families currently accessing Early Help.
- 297 child and family assessments being completed.
- 418 children subject to Child in Need Plans.
- 350 children subject to Child Protection Orders.
- 504 young people in the care of the Council.
- 165 children placed in internal foster care placements (including 64 placed with connected carers).
- 135 children placed in independent foster care placements.
- 22 young people placed in internal residential placements.
- 77 young people placed in external residential placements.

The Executive Member highlighted that there was a discrepancy between the total number of children and young people in the care of the Council and the breakdown of figures (above) in relation to placements. This was due to just over a 100 young people who were currently subject to Care Orders but being cared for by family members.

In terms of the budget for 2024-25, Children's Services had a budget of £55 million. This was 38.5% of the Council's overall budget of £143.2 million. It was highlighted that the budget for Children's Services had been cut significantly from £81 million in 2013, but had increased this year from the previous year when it was £35 million.

As part of the Transformation Programme and required savings going forward, £5.36 million of savings had been identified for 2024-25, with a further £3.25 million of savings identified for 2025-26. Current savings were on track to achieve £3.485 in 2024-25 with ongoing financial assurance on projects.

Projects that had been completed included the establishment of a review of Children's Care and a review of Special Guardianship Orders. This had achieved a significant cost avoidance of £3.08 million against high-cost external placements.

New projects for 2025-26 included Edge of Care and Modernising Fostering. This would examine final interventions to prevent a young person coming into care which should reduce pressure on residential care places being required.

The Board heard that the key areas of focus for Children's Services were:-

- Implementation of 'Signs of Safety' – new practice model to be rolled out in the coming months.
- Demand management and managing complexity – providing the right levels of support at the earliest opportunity.
- Placement sufficiency – work commenced with neighbouring authorities to ensure cost consistency for placements within the independent sector.
- Practice improvement (following a positive Ofsted focussed inspection of Care Leavers and DfE interventions being removed) – Ongoing work with Partners in Practice to improve consistency across the Care Leavers service.

The Executive Member advised the Board that his priorities as Executive Member were as

follows:-

- Oversight of the budget – including taking part in regular budget challenge sessions and monitoring progress on savings.
- Supporting improving quality of practice through challenge.
- Supporting the department to be stable and an employer of choice – working closely with the Executive Director and Director of Children's Care to attract and sustain a stable workforce with manageable workloads.
- Expanding foster care – develop strategy to encourage and retain new carers, plans for the Executive Member and Executive Director to attend Foster Carer Forum and build regular contact with carers.
- Strengthening 'the voice of the child' and corporate parenting – listening to young people and act on their views and experiences to make improvements and strengthen corporate parenting board including encouraging a more active role from strategic partners.
- Strengthening partnership working – The Executive Member advised that he had recently written to all Safeguarding Leads in schools to reaffirm the Council's commitment to working with them to keep young people safe.

During the ensuing discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- With reference to the 22 young people placed in internal residential placements, it was queried whether this was the maximum capacity. The Executive Director advised that this was currently around 80% capacity but highlighted that it was crucial to ensure that the matching needs of each individual young person and the placement were a priority which meant sometimes it was not possible to fill all of the places to capacity in order to best meet the needs of the young person.
- Reference was made to the Children's Service's budget which was £30 million in 2020 and had increased by £2m to £4m each year up to £38m in 2023. There had been an increase of £16m for 2024/25 and it was queried why there had been such a significant increase. The Executive Member responded that it was important to note that the cost was driven by the needs of young people and keeping them safe. Middlesbrough was a town with high levels of deprivation and the numbers of young people in care could fluctuate, with a small number of young people having high levels of need which drove up the cost of care provision. Savings had been made as a result of the ongoing transformation work and, had this not taken place, the budget for the service would have been much higher. The Children's Services budget increase was also reflective of the historical high numbers of young people in care, poor Ofsted inspection and DfE intervention, all of which contributed to increased financial pressure such as loss of workforce and an increase in agency staff and high demand for services.
- It was highlighted that the figures being discussed related to the department's budget and not how much the department had spent, as it had significantly overspent each year, however, the plan was to not overspend this year hence a larger budget.
- The Executive Director commented that there were two high-cost pressure areas within Children's Services – staffing and high-cost placements. A workforce strategy was now in place and work was ongoing to improve recruitment and retention of permanent staff to provide stability and reduce the additional costs of employing agency staff. In relation to high-cost placements, there were currently 77 young people placed in external residential placements which placed financial pressures on the budget.
- A Member queried what the current position was in relation to the Council building its own residential homes for young people. The Executive Director advised that the Children's Services strategy was due to be updated in March and would provide details of plans to bring new homes on-line and details of commissioning arrangements. An all-Member briefing would be held to update Members on the revised strategy prior to a report being submitted to the Executive in March 2025.
- A Board Member queried whether there would potentially be a business opportunity to sell on places not being used by Middlesbrough children in our internal residential provision, should it be available, to other local authorities, once internal provision was expanded. The Executive Member acknowledged this was an important point but highlighted the

need to ensure that any young person placed within Middlesbrough would need to be carefully matched and this could bring added complications. He considered it key to expand the Early Help offer and fostering service so that earlier interventions would mean fewer young people would need to come into care. Again, the potential options would be presented to Executive in March.

- Reference was made to child sexual exploitation, and it was queried whether it was known to be a problem in Middlesbrough. It was acknowledged that this was a national topic of discussion and that Middlesbrough would continue to work with its partners to combat child exploitation. A piece of work within the Tees Valley, 'Harm outside the Home' was something that needed to be emphasised. There was a dedicated exploitation team working with the most high-risk young people in Middlesbrough and exploitation needed to be responded to by the service and by the region as a whole. There was a consistent response and interventions in place. SHiFT was working with high-risk young people mainly around exploitation and a thorough review was being carried out to ensure that the response was appropriate and that there were sufficient resources in place and assurance was given that this would remain the case.
- A Member of the Board expressed concern regarding the figures in Middlesbrough in relation to child poverty and considered this to be one of the drivers for child exploitation and queried whether there had been an increase in child exploitation cases or whether figures were stable. The Director of Children's Care stated that this was difficult to answer but had witnessed some great work being done around exploitation ensuring it was responded to quickly and that appropriate support was put in place to stop it happening. There was no obvious increase or decrease but there was ongoing concern over levels of exploitation. There was a focus on building on a regional approach and strengthening relationships with partner organisations.
- In response to a query regarding kinship carers, or connected persons foster carers, it was stated that they remained very much part of plans to expand and modernise the fostering service. It was highlighted that the number of permanency orders made for family members had increased and this was always the first option – to place a young person with a family member if it was safe and suitable to do so. A dedicated team, funded by the Department for Education, was progressing permanency for young people through this route.
- A Member of the Board requested figures in relation to the cost difference between external and internal residential placements. The Executive Director advised that such costings, alongside quality of care, would be examined as part of the Children's Services Strategy, but average figures could be obtained and provided to the Board.
- A Member queried how many of the 77 young people currently placed in external residential placements could potentially be better matched in internal placements. In response it was explained that matching each young person was complex and depended on their individual needs, which must also be balanced with the needs of any other young people in placement. For example, some young people required a solo placement and whilst it may cost less to place them in an internal placement, it may not always be possible. Placement profiling and trend analysis was also being explored as part of the three-year strategy being developed. There were many factors to take into consideration, with safety being the number one priority, to ensure that any internal residential provision was appropriate and that any investment in internal residential provision was appropriate. There was also an education element that must be considered to ensure that any young people brought into internal placements from external placements had the correct education provision and support. £3 million of savings had already been delivered in relation to high-cost external placements.
- Reference was made to Early Help and a Member commented that it was good to hear that there was a drive to increase early help support in order to avoid issues escalating. It was queried whether early help services were fully staffed and whether there were any plans to expand. It was confirmed that early help was currently fully staffed and consideration was being given to focussing on even earlier prevention services at universal stage.
- A Board Member asked how many care providers/companies the Council had dealt with in

placing the 77 young people in external residential placements and whether each placement was negotiated on a one-to-one basis or whether there were contracts in place. The Executive Director stated that he would provide the figures to Members and advised that the commissioning service ensured that all necessary checks and matching criteria, based on the needs of each young person, was taken into account to ensure the placement was safe and appropriate and that their needs would be met before any agreements were reached. Reference was made to a national placement shortage and ongoing work between the 12 north east local authorities to commission better placements and costs on a regional basis.

- A Member questioned how many young people in care in Middlesbrough were not in education, employment and training (NEET) and whether the numbers had increased and what was being done to address it. The Executive Member advised that 64.5% of young people in care (aged 15 and over) were in education, employment or training. This compared with 93.9% of their peers who were not in care. It was recognised that this needed to be addressed, however, Middlesbrough's NEET service was a top performer overall and this was recognised by the DfE. The NEET Team sat within Early Help services and a 'buddy' system had been introduced to pair staff from the NEET Team with staff within the Children Looked After Team to support young people in care into education, employment and training.
- Reference was made to internal (Middlesbrough Council registered) foster carers and those registered with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) and it was queried why there was a higher number of IFA placements and why carers chose to register with IFAs above the Council. The Board heard that historically, carers chose to register with IFAs as the fostering payments were higher, however, the Council had recently increased its foster carer payments and the focus on training and support had improved and steps to modernise the Fostering Service in Middlesbrough were underway. It was highlighted that Middlesbrough was part of a Regional Fostering Alliance which was being developed and improved further.
- In response to a query, it was stated that cost savings had still been made following the increase in foster carer payments as it had strengthened the Council's position to retain and recruit carers.
- The Executive Member added that there were some exciting developments coming up within fostering and that he would be happy to come back to update the Board in future.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member, Executive Director of Children's Services and Director of Children's Care for their attendance and the information provided. The Chair also wished to place on record his thanks to the Directors for their passion in leading the service forward and to the staff within Children's Services.

AGREED as follows:-

1. That the information provided be noted.
2. That figures be provided to the Board in relation to the cost difference between internal and external residential placements.
3. That information be provided to the Board regarding how many private care providers were involved in the placement of the 77 young people currently placed in external residential care.

24/59

EXECUTIVE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair introduced the item for the Board's consideration. A copy of the Work Programme was attached at Appendix A and Members were asked to raise any issues they had in relation to any of the items listed.

No issues were raised.

AGREED that the report be noted.

24/60

SCRUTINY CHAIRS UPDATEPeople Scrutiny Panel

The Chair of the People Scrutiny Panel updated the Board that the Panel had met on 20 January 2025 and had received further evidence, in relation to its scrutiny topic of Children Missing from Education, from the Virtual School. The meeting was attended by the Head of Outward Academy Ormesby and, following discussion, Members requested further input from schools prior to concluding evidence-gathering on the topic.

The Panel also received an introduction to its new topic of Homelessness and would consider terms of reference at its next meeting on 17 February 2025.

Place Scrutiny Panel

The Chair of the Place Scrutiny Panel updated the Board that the Panel met on 6 January 2025. The meeting was attended by representatives from Jomast Properties who provided further information in relation to the Panel's scrutiny topic of 'Empty Properties'. The Panel also received statutory annual updates in relation to the Community Safety Partnership and Prevent and Chanel programmes.

The Scrutiny Panel's Task and Finish Group on Home to School Transport had met with the Integrated Transport Manager and the draft final report on the topic was currently being compiled.

Overview and Scrutiny Board – Task and Finish Group: Community Cohesion

Councillor Branson updated Members that the above Task and Finish Group had recently met with Andy McDonald MP to obtain his views in relation to community cohesion and were due to meet with the Police and Crime Commissioner for Cleveland.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

24/61

ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH, IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED.

There were no other urgent items to be considered.

EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Members were asked to consider passing a resolution to exclude the press and public from the meeting, due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Following a vote, Members agreed to exclude the press and public as follows:-

ORDERED that the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items on the grounds that, if present, there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 1, 2 and 4 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 and that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

24/62

FORWARD PLAN ACTIONS PROGRESS****DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

At this point in the meeting, Councillors Clynych and Ewan both declared non-pecuniary interests in relation to the following item as they were both Members of the Levick Trust.

Members of the Board had previously identified Levick Court as an item of interest on the Executive Forward Work Programme and had requested an update prior to consideration by the Executive.

The Interim Director of Adult Social Care and Health Integration was in attendance at the meeting and provided a verbal update in relation to the item.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.