

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

ADDENDUM

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

11 MAY 2022

FINAL REPORT

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S SOCIAL CARE & SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL SUFFICIENCY & PERMANENCY (PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN CARE)

1. The Scrutiny Panel's review was carried out over the course of the full Municipal Year 2020-21 and was lengthy to compile given the volume of evidence provided, the very broad subject matter and various changes in political structures.
2. Given that the Children's Services improvement journey was required to move at pace, and that the service has inevitably been subject to continuous monitoring and inspection by Ofsted, many of the issues of concern to the Panel at the time of the review had already begun to be addressed and progress is being made.
3. The progress made to date by Children's Services is supported by the decision made by the Minister for Children and Families to endorse the recommendations made in July 2021 by Peter Dwyer, Department for Education's Children's Commissioner, that the Service no longer required oversight by the Commissioner.
4. Mr Dwyer worked closely with the Council from January 2020 and his final report in July 2021 noted "considerable progress has been made and there is evidence of real impact." "Most impressively in the face of significant demand and need, the Council has tackled legacy issues which had inflated the volume of cases in higher tiers of provision."
5. The Commissioner's report noted specific improvements including a reduction in the numbers of children on Child Protection Plans and a speeding up of assessment timeframes. The number of Children Looked After reduced from a peak of **702** in August 2020 to **539** in July 2021.
6. With this in mind, it is worth highlighting that the data provided to the Panel was correct at the time it was provided and that by the nature of the subject matter, data is constantly changing and evolving.
7. On 14 and 15 December 2021 a second Ofsted Monitoring Visit took place, specifically focusing on: Children in Need; Children in Need of Protection and Public Law Outline.
8. The findings of the inspection include:-
 - Senior managers have a realistic view on progress made since the last inspection.
 - Social worker caseloads have reduced.
 - The ongoing improvement work has resulted in 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.

- The Council is ensuring that children are allocated to social workers who have the required time to work with them.
- More focus is needed on the lived experience of individual children, but notes that plans are in place to address this and other issues

National Picture – Latest Headline Information – 2020-21¹

9. The latest figures available from the DfE for Children Looked After in England as of year end 31 March 2021.
10. As at 31 March 2021, the number of Children Looked After in England was **80,850** – this figure has increased by **1%** from the previous year and is now at an all-time high.
11. **28,440** children started being looked after during the year ending 31 March 2021 – down **8%** on the previous year.
12. **28,010** children ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March 2021 – down **6%** on the previous year.
13. The number of children who ceased to be looked after because they were adopted was **2,870** – down **18%** on the previous year.
14. The rate per 10,000 children, aged 18 and under, who were looked after as at 31 March 2021 was **67** and this was the same as in 2020.
15. The data shows that in 2021, the number of children looked after by local authorities in England rose to its highest level at **80,850**, up by **1%** on the previous year.
16. The increase was driven by there being slightly more children started to be looked after during the year than those ceasing to be looked after, however, both starting and ceasing were down with monthly figures showing:-
 - The numbers of children starting to be looked after were consistently lower than usually expected throughout the year but were particularly low during periods of national lockdowns or when restrictions were in place.
 - The numbers of children ceasing to be looked after were similarly affected by the first national lockdown but returned to the levels typically expected from September 2020 onwards. This fall is likely to have driven an increase in the average duration of care for those ceasing to be looked after, which increased by a further 79 days (more than two and a half months) compared to the previous year.
17. Other interesting headlines suggest an impact of the pandemic are:-
 - The number of CLA who were adopted has fallen 18%, continuing a fall from a peak in 2015. The large decrease this year is likely driven by the impact on court proceedings during the pandemic where cases progressed more slowly or were paused.

¹ DfE Statistics for Children Looked After in England year end 31 March 2021.

In Middlesbrough

18. In providing this update, the following update information was provided to the Corporate Parenting Board meeting on 18 January 2022:-

Permanency

19. From the height of **702** children looked after in September 2020, the figure has reduced to **510**. During the 12 month period November 2020 to November 2021, numbers had reduced from 654 to 526. This was a **19.5%** reduction.
20. This equates to **197.4** per 10,000 per population in November 2020 reducing to **158.8** in November 2021. This is the lowest rate in 12 months and was continuing to reduce month on month. By January 2022, this rate reduced further to **149** per 10,000 – narrowing the gap for demand between Middlesbrough and its regional statistical neighbours (whose rate was **134** per 10,000).
21. In terms of adoption, since 1 April 2021, **19** adoption orders have been granted, including four to children from BAME backgrounds; four to sibling groups of more than two and four to children over the age of four.
22. More Middlesbrough children have been adopted than from any other Tees Valley Local authority.
23. There has been a significant reduction in the number of days between a Placement Order being granted and a child being adopted has reduced from **558** in 2019/20 to **382** in 2020/21.
24. There are currently **38** Middlesbrough children progressing to adoption, with all but two children already linked to potential adopters.
25. Within the last 12 months **76** children secured permanency via Special Guardianship Orders.
26. As at January 2022, there were **114** children residing in connected carer (kinship care) placements. This has reduced from a peak of **212** in 2020.
27. **47** children currently resided in Placements with Parents (PWP) and this has reduced from **52** in October 2021, and from a peak of **99** in September 2020, then **50** in August 2021. This equates to an overall reduction of 52%.
28. There has been a reduction in external residential placements from **74** in June 2021 to **47** in December 2021. This is a positive step as children cared for in Middlesbrough and in Middlesbrough placements achieve better outcomes.
29. School attendance for looked after children stood at **91%** in November 2021 and there had been no permanent exclusions in the last five years.
30. **3.1%** of looked after children are receiving less than 25 hours of education per week (11 children). Action Plans and oversight from the Virtual School were in place for each child.

31. Children's Services has identified that risks to making continuing progress include: an increase in demand across the Tees Valley, and the region as a whole; recruitment of staff within the children looked after and care leaving services.

Sufficiency

32. In terms of increasing placements for Middlesbrough children that are closer to home, internal occupancy increased to **23** young people being placed across Middlesbrough's residential provision. Work is continuing on a regional framework (12 north east local authorities) or sub regional framework to develop this.
33. The intensive work undertaken with PAUSE has proved positive and the contract has been extended for a further six months. PAUSE is currently working with **11** women who have had multiple children removed from their care or are at risk of further removals.
34. Of the **326** foster placements, the number of in-house foster care placements (with Middlesbrough foster carers) has increased to **169 (52%)** and has now overtaken the number of placements with Independent foster carers (IFAs), **157 (48%)**. Middlesbrough continues to run a significant recruitment campaign to attract in house foster carers. In addition, a business case for a new in-house fostering service delivery model continues to be developed.
35. Weekly monitoring takes place in respect of residential placements in Middlesbrough and there has been a shift away from reliance on external market provision towards in-house residential provision, largely due to the opening of Rosecroft and Daniel Court.
36. At the start of January 2022 there were **68** young people placed in residential provision – **23 (34%)** in internal provision and **45 (66%)** in external provision but this was reducing.

Demographics

37. In terms of the children looked after population in Middlesbrough, **54%** are male; **45%** are female and **1%** are unaccompanied asylum seeker children.
38. In terms of ethnicity of the current children looked after population in Middlesbrough, the highest percentage are White/British – **81%**, with **8%** mixed race; **7%** Black or Black/British; **2%** Asian or Asian/British and **2%** from various other nationalities.
39. Within the six months up to January 2022, **97** children became looked after due to abuse or neglect (this is a slight increase on the year 2020/21) and remains significantly higher than statistical neighbours and the England average.
40. In terms of **demand**, in January 2021 there were **617** children looked after in Middlesbrough. This figure has reduced by **17%** during the last 12 months (to January 2022), and there has been an overall reduction of **27%** since the height of demand in September 2020 (**702** children looked after).
41. For every 0.6 children entering care, one child exits and this ratio has been maintained for the six-month period to January 2022.

Futures for Families

42. Since going live in September 2020, Futures for Families had supported **50** young people on the edge of entering care. Of those 50, **37** had not become looked after (74%).
43. Of the 37 young people that did not become looked after:-
- 21 were supported at Child in Need level (57%).
 - 11 remained supported at Child in Need level.
 - 10 children (47%) no longer required a Child in Need Plan and were no longer in need of support by the local authority.
 - 16 young people (43%) were subject to Child Protection procedures.
 - 10 remained supported at Child Protection level.
 - 4 (25%) were 'stepped down' to receive Child in Need support.
 - 2 (13%) no longer required any service from Children's Social Care.

Caseloads

44. Since December 2020, and throughout the improvement journey, caseloads have consistently reduced. Whilst caseloads vary between services, the average caseload across Children's Social Care (per full time equivalent employee) stands at **16.7** in December 2021. This has reduced from **22.3** in December 2020.

Placement Stability

45. In the last 12 months, less than **5%** of the children looked after population have experienced placement breakdowns.
46. In January 2021, **123** (20%) looked after children had experienced three or more placements over the last 12 month period.
47. This has reduced to **36** in December 2021. This equates to 7% of the current looked after population. This figure is currently below all external benchmarks and below Middlesbrough's outturn for 2020/21.
48. This has been achieved through improvement in practice, ensuring care plans are reviewed more regularly and more effective in supporting placement stability; stronger partnership working and stronger management oversight.
49. It is worth pointing out that not all placement moves are disruptive. For example, a child may move from a foster placement back to parents or to a planned adoptive placement.

Quality and Impact

50. In terms of outcomes and quality of practice, key performance outcomes from the December 2021 performance report are highlighted below:-
- **94%** of children looked after had been seen within the last six weeks. This is a 5% decrease from November 2021, however, this has been consistently high with more than 90% of children looked after being seen since May 2021.
 - Management oversight of cases has improved, with **94%** of children looked after receiving management oversight in the form of supervision within the month of

December 2021. Again, this is a 5% decrease from November 2021, however, this has been consistently high with more than 90% of CLA receiving management oversight since May 2021.

- **99%** of children looked after had a recorded Personal Education Plan (PEP) within the previous six months. This performance has remained consistently high and has not dropped below 93% for the last 12 months.
- **90.8%** of CLA health assessments have been conducted and recorded within the last 12 months. (This does not include a small cohort of older young people who did not wish to undertake a health assessment). Again, performance has been consistently high at more than 90% for the last 12 months.
- **66.1%** of children had undergone dental assessments in the last 12 months and appears to be one of the areas most impacted by Covid and requires ongoing improvement.

Changing Perceptions of Children in Care

51. Key to improving perceptions around children in care is ensuring the voice of those with care experience is heard and listened to.
52. Since the review was undertaken, a significant amount of work has been ongoing to increase participation with children in care and care leavers. This includes the commissioning of 'Participation People' – an organisation that delivers award-winning youth voice, engagement and participation programmes across the UK and is working with Middlesbrough Council to:-
 - Inspire Change – Changing the approach to working with young people by transforming organisational culture.
 - Gain Data – Helping to understand the lived experience of young people by using youth-led programmes.
 - Take Action – Keeping young people engaged and working with them to find out what they think needs to change.
53. As a result of collaborative working, the following groups have recently been re-launched for care experienced young people to come together and have a voice in influencing key decision makers when developing services for children and young people:-
 - Middlesbrough Mini Children in Care Council – for care experienced young people aged 7 – 12 years
 - Middlesbrough Children in Care Council – for care experienced young people aged 13 – 17 years
 - Middlesbrough Care Leavers Forum – for care experienced young adults aged 18 – 25 years.
54. In addition, through engagement with Participation People, Middlesbrough's Corporate Parenting Board has been kept updated and involved in youth engagement work and recently hosted a workshop with care experienced young people and care leavers to

Speak to them about their experiences of being looked after, their hopes and aspirations for the future and how they see services for young people being shaped.

CONCLUSIONS

31. Based on the evidence provided throughout the investigation, the Panel's conclusions are as follows:-
- a) The Panel wishes to acknowledge that due to the need for Children's Services to improve with urgency and pace, significant progress has been made since the Panel commenced its review. This is supported by the Department for Education's Children's Commissioner recommending that Children's Services in Middlesbrough no longer required oversight by the Commissioner and was endorsed by the Minister for Children and Families in July 2021.
 - b) The Panel also acknowledges that improvements were made despite significant demand on services coupled with the Covid pandemic which called for alternative and inventive ways of working.
 - c) The Panel recognises that whilst the number of children looked after in Middlesbrough remains high, it has significantly reduced – with a 19.5% reduction during the period November 2020 to November 2021.
 - d) The Panel feels reassured that since the start of its review, significant improvements have been made across Children's Services in Middlesbrough, with the following areas most recently noted as having improved by Ofsted:-
 - Senior managers are realistic and know their service – they are aware of progress and areas that still require improvement.
 - Social Worker caseloads have begun to reduce.
 - There is stronger practice in relation to immediate safeguarding concerns and in support provision for children in need where serious concerns exist and they are on the 'edge of care'.
 - Social Workers are enthusiastic and know their children and families well and are committed to improving their lives.
 - e) The Panel also notes positive progress has been made in the following areas:-
 - An increase in the numbers of children being adopted, where it is in their best interests, with more Middlesbrough children being adopted than from any other Tees Valley local authority in the last 12 months up to December 2021. Parallel planning has been improved between Middlesbrough's fostering service and Adoption Tees Valley. In addition, Adoption Tees Valley continues to promote interest in adopting through continuous recruitment events managed by a dedicated Marketing Officer.
 - A significant reduction in the number of children living in connected carer placements and an increase in the number of children whose permanency has been secured via Special Guardianship orders.
 - A 50% reduction in the number of children residing in Placements with Parents during the 12 month period to August 2021.
 - A significant reduction in external residential placements in the six months up to December 2021.
 - An increase in young people being placed in Middlesbrough residential provision.

- An increase in the use of in-house foster care placements as opposed to Independent Foster Agency placements.
- f) The Panel is aware that there are areas of the service that require further development and is keen to ensure it is kept updated on progress.
- g) The Panel heard that Children's Services has implemented a sophisticated data analysis package to monitor demand, impact and trends and to support improved performance reporting and social work practice. A raft of Performance Management Framework indicators are in place and appropriate scorecards are being developed by the Service Area and Children's Services Improvement Advisor, with input from the relevant Chairs, for use by this Scrutiny Panel, the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel and Corporate Parenting Board for governance and assurance purposes. The Service has also developed a set of seven proxy indicators with indicative targets based on statistical neighbour averages with the ambition of achieving the statistical neighbour average for children looked after over the next three years.
- h) The Panel recognises that the Futures for Families Service has been successful in providing support for young people on the edge of care and has prevented 37 young people becoming looked after. The service also provides support to fragile placements and placement stability has improved.
- i) The Panel notes that there have been improvements in practice with consistently high numbers of children looked after being seen by social workers; improved management oversight of cases; consistently high (99%) numbers of children looked after having a recorded Personal Education Plan and more than 90% of children looked after health assessments being carried out. The Panel notes that an area for improvement is dental assessments where 66% of children looked after have had an assessment in the last 12 months, however, this has also been impacted by Covid.
- j) The Panel is aware of the need to increase the number of Middlesbrough foster carers in order to provide sufficient local placements for Middlesbrough children and acknowledges that in-house capacity has been increased due to continued foster carer recruitment drives and a range of initiatives including managed social work teams (Innovate) specifically working to: bring children from expensive external placements back to Middlesbrough; reduce the number of children placed with parents on care orders (where safe to do so); progressing plans for Special Guardianship where children live with a connected persons carer; and ensuring support is provided for children living with foster carers where the placement is at risk of breaking down. This work has realised significant cost reductions. The Panel acknowledges that there are specific groups of young people for whom more specialised carers/placements are required including older children/teens, parent and baby placements, sibling groups, children with complex needs and/or disabilities, children from minority ethnic groups and that these children can wait longer for permanent homes.
- k) A Corporate Parenting Strategy has been devised and adopted which includes a Permanency Strategy and Sufficiency Strategic sitting within it. Each strategy was shaped by input from children and young people in Middlesbrough.

- l) The Panel heard that Children's Services had developed a social work practice model 'Children and Relationships First', developed with the workforce. This was supported by the recently established Centre for Practice Excellence which, as well as supporting the practice model, provides co-ordination to driving innovation and best practice across the whole system of support for children and young people and offers tools and resources to support the practice model, workforce development, quality assurance arrangements and opportunities to share and develop best practice.

- m) The Panel recognises the excellent work being undertaken by Pause, a national charity working with women who have experienced, or are at risk of, repeat removals of children from their care. Pause offers an intensive support programme with the aim of breaking the cycle of repeat removals by supporting women to tackle destructive patterns of behaviour and to develop new skills and responses to create a positive future. Pause is currently working with 11 women in Middlesbrough.

- n) In terms of improving perceptions of children in care, the Panel is encouraged to learn that increased engagement is taking place with children in care and care leavers through Participation People and is supportive of this being developed going forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

32. Based on the evidence gathered during the investigation, and the conclusions above, the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel makes the following recommendations for consideration by the Executive:-
- a) The Panel supports the sustained efforts being made to reduce the number of children looked after in Middlesbrough in line with our regional statistical neighbours and that the performance scorecard being reported to LMT on a six-weekly basis in relation to this indicator be shared with the Panel on a quarterly basis.
 - b) The Panel notes the high percentage of children (15.1%) who become looked after at birth and recommends that a specific piece of work be undertaken to establish why this is the case and that this work includes performance information and exploration of whether further interventions can be put in place to reduce this figure. If appropriate, a set of performance indicators should be identified to monitor improvement over the next year in the first instance.
 - c) That analysis be undertaken to identify any potential gaps in child protection provision in the more ethnically diverse wards and further work be undertaken to provide assurance that the statistical under representation/over representation of children of different ethnicities being looked after by the local authority aligns with the level of need amongst these groups.
 - d) That work is undertaken to identify how the provision of Early Help can be increased in North Ormesby, (subject to further analysis and if this remains appropriate), and that the recommendations put forward by this Panel in its Final Report on 'Locality Working from a Children's Services Perspective' regarding further assessment of demand and the number of Early Help workers assigned to the areas, be taken forward.
 - e) That the sustained efforts to increase the number of children being placed in an in-house foster placement be continued and that the targets established remain a key priority indicator for the service and performance be regularly reported to the Panel.
 - f) The Panel appreciates the challenges faced by the service in relation to the recruitment and retention of Foster Carers and the continuous efforts being made to increase in-house Foster Carer provision. It is recommended that additional feedback is sought from Foster Carers leaving Middlesbrough's Fostering Service to ensure that the information gained through the satisfaction surveys is fully utilised to focus on continuing improvement in this area.
 - g) The Panel notes that there is currently very little advertising across the town to indicate that Middlesbrough Council needs and wants more people to become in-house foster carers. The Panel recommends that the work to increase the number of carers continues with pace and focus on additional advertising and marketing which should be analysed to improve awareness of the continuous need for more people to become in-house foster carers.
 - h) The Panel appreciates that an essential strand to improving sufficiency is to continue to improve social work practice. It is acknowledged that numerous initiatives have been put in place to achieve this including the introduction of a Social Work Practice Model, a new Centre for Practice Excellence, the development of the Corporate Parenting Strategy, the work undertaken by the Future for Families Team, the commissioning of Innovate Teams and the effectiveness of the PAUSE project. However, whilst the Panel acknowledges

improvements in the reduction of the use of Connected Carer Placements and Placements with Parents, it remains an area for improvement, and it is recommended that performance data is regularly presented to the panel in respect of these elements.

- i) The Panel recognises that particular progress has been made in strengthening the auditing process which provides a wide and in-depth coverage of the quality of services, however, a small proportion of social work practice continues to be identified as 'inadequate' through the audits. Whilst the Panel notes the continuing reduction in 'inadequate' practice, it recommends that increased focus is placed on addressing poor quality practice through increased management oversight, support, guidance and training identified as appropriate for individuals, as set out in the Children's Services improvement plan.
- j) The Panel would also reinforce that the day to day lived experience of the child should be at the heart of all social work practice and that this should be a key feature of learning and development to improve practice and a key part of the auditing process.
- k) That the improvement in the number of children being placed for adoption over the period 2018/19 (17) to 2020/21 (22) be continued alongside the improved focus on permanency planning.
- l) That progress against the set of seven proxy indicators with indicative targets based on statistical neighbour averages be reported to the panel and OSB on a quarterly basis.
- m) That mandatory training to provide a basic awareness of the Children's Social Care system, including information regarding key terms and phrases, be provided to all Council staff and Elected Members through the Middlesbrough Learns platform and that this be completed on an annual basis.
- n) That the local authority considers the use of certain terminology and acronyms that can be perceived as negative in relation to children in care/care leavers and that this be considered in conjunction with the young people themselves via the Children in Care Council, Care Leavers Forum and other participation routes.
- o) That the Participation Officer be asked to undertake a piece of work with children in care and care leavers through the various forums that have been established, to obtain their views around their experiences of the care system, what works well, what does not work well and to present their findings to the Panel and the Corporate Parenting Board.
- p) That opportunities are maximised to continually gather the views of children and young people in care, care leavers and their carers that can be used to shape and drive service improvement within the system.

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Sue Butcher	Executive Director of Children's Services
Rachel Farnham	Director of Children's Care
Rob Brown	Director of Education & Partnerships
Victoria Banks	Head of the Virtual School
Caroline Cannon	Head of SEN & Vulnerable Learners
Kay Dargue	Head of Partnerships
Trevor Dunn	Head of Access to Education
Gail Earl	Head of Prevention
Claire Kemp	Community Learning & Employability Manager
Amanda Richardson-Roe	Head of Referral & Assessment
Paula Jemson	Head of Corporate Parenting & Performance
Paul Rudd	Residential Care Service Manager
Rob Hamer	Futures for Families Service Manager
Bill Robinson	Children's Services Programme Manager
Jenny Rowan	Team Manager, Children's Care
Sam Turner	Policy & Participation Manager, Become
Vicky Davison-Boyd	Service Manager, Adoption Tees Valley

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The following sources were used/referred to in the preparation of this report:-

Reports to, and minutes of, the Children & Young People's Social Care & Services Scrutiny Panel meetings: 14 September, 12 October, 9 November, 7 December 2020, 18 January, 15 February & 22 March 2021.

HM Government - Working Together to Safeguard Children (A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children) July 2018, updated December 2020.

HM Government – Working Together to Safeguard Children (Statutory Framework – legislation relevant to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children) July 2018.

Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

DfE Statistics for Children Looked After in England year end 31 March 2020.

Government Statistics - Fostering in England 2019/20 (main findings).

The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations: Vol. 2 – June 2015 – DfE.

Ofsted Inspection on Middlesbrough Children's Social Care Services 25/11/19 – 06/12/19 (published 24/01/20).

Sufficiency – Statutory Guidance on Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children (March 2010).

PAUSE website and correspondence; Become Charity website & reports

**COUNCILLOR D DAVISON
CHAIR, CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S SOCIAL CARE & SERVICES SCRUTINY
PANEL**

**The Current Membership of the Panel: Councillors: T Mawston (Vice Chair),
A Hellaoui, T Higgins, M Nugent, M Storey, Z Uddin, J Walker and G Wilson.**

(During the course of the review, the Panel Membership was as follows: Councillors: L Garvey (Chair), C Dodds (Vice Chair), C Cooke, B Cooper (from S Hill, M Saunders, Z Uddin, J Walker, G Wilson & C Wright).

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