

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 12 October 2020.

PRESENT: Councillor Dodds (Vice Chair in the Chair); Councillors: Cooke, Hill, Saunders, Uddin, J Walker and Wilson.

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

PRESENT BY INVITATION: A High – Deputy Mayor and Executive Member for Children's Services.
A Hellaoui – Chair of Corporate Parenting Board.

APOLOGIES for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Garvey and Wright.

**** DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

There were no Declarations of Interest made by Members at this point in the meeting.

MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel held on 14 September 2020 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

SUFFICIENCY AND PERMANENCY (PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN CARE) – FURTHER INFORMATION

S Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services, accompanied by R Farnham, Director of Children's Care, was in attendance at the meeting to present the Panel with information relating to a profile of the children and young people in Middlesbrough's care.

The Panel was shown the Children's Services new logo – Middlesbrough Children Matter – which was designed in consultation with children as part of the communications strategy, and depicted three children dressed as super-heroes with the strapline "our mission is to show Middlesbrough children that they matter". This was well-received by the Panel.

The Panel was presented with detailed information in relation to Middlesbrough's children looked after population in order to gain a better understanding of who the children in our care were and the demand placed on Children's Services.

Middlesbrough currently had 689 children looked after – equating to 210.1 per 10,000 population - which was the highest rate in the North East and the second highest rate nationally.

Members were provided with a detailed breakdown of the numbers of children in Middlesbrough known to Children's Services in the following categories:-

	September 2019	September 2020
Early Help (Combined)	1,186	1,867
Children in Need (CiN)	1,017	1,868
CiN Plans	496	932
Child Protection	300	603
Children Looked After	554	689
Care Leavers	150	152
Children with Disabilities	* 164 (* October 2019)	197

It could be seen that the whole system in general had more children in it and there had been a significant increase in the numbers of children becoming looked after in the last year. The rate of care leavers and children with disabilities had remained fairly static.

When Middlesbrough's figures were compared with regional statistical neighbours, Middlesbrough had the highest rate of looked after children (under 18) per 10,000; the highest rate of looked after children in the last quarter; the highest rate of children (per 10,000) ceasing to be looked after; and the lowest rate of children looked after that moved to adoption. It was acknowledged that further improvements were needed in terms of increasing the number of children that were placed in adoptive placements.

A regional comparison of the 12 north east local authorities, between the rates of children looked after as at week commencing 16 March 2020 (start of lockdown) and the week commencing 5 October 2020 were provided. It showed that only North Tyneside and Redcar had noted reductions in the number of children becoming looked after, per 10,000 population, during that period, with a reduction of 14 and 8 children respectively. All other authorities had experienced an increase, with Middlesbrough having the highest increase of 75 children. This showed a stark increase in Middlesbrough in the increase in children looked after compared to the other regional authorities. The reasons for this could include that Middlesbrough was not doing enough to move children on to their forever families and that neglect was not being recognised soon enough.

In order to build up a profile of the 689 children in Middlesbrough's care, and for whom Members were corporate parents, the Panel was informed that:-

Age Groups

- 5.6% were aged 0-1 year.
- 21.4% were aged 1-4 years.
- 23% were aged 4-9 years.
- 35.4% were aged 10-15 years.
- 14.5% were aged 16 and over.

The largest percentage of children looked after were in the 10-15 years age group. This equated to 244 children and almost half of Middlesbrough's current looked after population was aged 10 plus (344 children, or 49.9%).

20 young people (3%) had started their care episodes when they were aged 16 or older. The reasons for this could be due to the young person having been cared for by a family member or that Children's Services had not recorded that they needed the authority's care early enough and perhaps some children had been missed.

15.1% (or 104) children who became looked after were new born – aged 0-1 year. This was greater than the national trend.

Ethnicity

- 84.9% of the current looked after population in Middlesbrough was white. This was an over-representation against the school population at 78%.
- 6.1% of children were of mixed ethnicity (in line with the school population of 6%).
- 2.3% were Asian – an under-representation against the school population of 11%.
- 5% were black – an over-representation against the school population of 2%.
- 0.9% were defined as 'other' – an under-representation against the school population of 4%.

Geography

It was highlighted that there were higher numbers of children looked after in some Wards and whilst deprivation was a key factor, it was not the only factor. Greater understanding of the way in which Children's Services worked and safeguarded in some communities could also be a driver in understanding demand for services.

For example, one in 15 children in North Ormesby were looked after, however, proportionately Children's Services did not work with families at a child protection threshold to the same level. This was similar for Newport.

- North Ormesby – 3.9 children were looked after per every one child on a child protection plan.
- Brambles Farm and Thorntree – 1.3 children were looked after per every one child on a child protection plan.

In terms of the children in Middlesbrough's care, it was highlighted that a large proportion of children that became looked after (approximately 20%) were aged under one year. A breakdown of data provided to the Panel indicated that the majority of children under one year that became looked after, were subject to a Child Protection Plan prior to their birth.

Within the last three years, 166 children (13%) that were subject to a pre-birth Child Protection Plan became looked after following their birth. Within the last 12 months, 59 children (9%) who were the subject of a pre-birth Child Protection Plan, became looked after; and within the last six months the figure was 28 children (7%).

In addition, the information showed that those children that became looked after between the age of 0-1 year was: 162 (13%) within the last three years (13% having been subject to a Child Protection Plan already); 59 children (21%) within the last 12 months (6% having been subject to a Child Protection Plan); and 27 (17%) within the last six months (6% having been subject to a Child Protection Plan).

Initial indications highlighted that these figures were higher than regional and statistical comparators and further work was required to establish:-

- Were the Safeguarding of Unborn Babies procedures effective?
- Was enough work was being done with the unborn babies' families in relation to the Child Protection Plans?
- Did the Safeguarding plans go far enough and did they allow sufficient time to assess and support families?
- Were midwives identifying issues/risks early enough? Some at risk unborn babies did not come to the attention of Children's Care until very late in the pregnancy or until they were born.
- Were children's services, or other partners, aware of any older siblings?

In terms of trying to address this, Children's Services was involved in several initiatives including:-

- PAUSE – Part of a regional consortium in the North East. This was a new Barnardo's project working with women who had previously had children removed from them. Intensive work was undertaken to encourage women not to have further pregnancies. The project had been successful in other parts of the country.
- Vulnerable Parenting Pathway – This involved colleagues from Children's Services and Public Health to identify parents early enough to ensure that they receive the right support and to intervene early enough to ensure children could live at home safely with their parents.

A Member of the Panel queried whether there had been an impact on early intervention work with pregnant mums since the closure of many children's centres. It was acknowledged that the previous children's centres (or Sure Start Centres) had been a valuable resource, however, some mums were pregnant for the eighth or ninth time and the PAUSE project would greatly assist in working with those mums.

A Panel Member asked whether the Panel could be provided with data around how many women were being supported by the project and the outcomes of the interventions. The Director responded that the project had gone 'live' in August and that she would be happy to provide this information, once it was available, to a future meeting.

One Panel Member commented that he was aware of a couple of cases within his own constituency where women had stated that the only time they had felt safe was when they were pregnant and that any work, such as the PAUSE project, that might help in some way would be very welcome.

Four coloured maps of Middlesbrough were displayed to the Panel, showing the numbers of cases in each of Middlesbrough's Wards in relation to Early Help, Children in Need, Child Protection and Children Looked after respectively.

The Ward maps showed a high level of need in Brambles and Thorntree and Berwick Hills and Pallister. It showed that there was a greater proportion of Early Help and Child in Need activity in these areas but fewer Children Looked After. Further work was needed to examine whether resources were being targeted in the right areas.

The graphs showed a gap in Child Protection provision in the more ethnically diverse wards. Newport had the highest proportion of Children Looked After interventions, however, it was fifth highest in terms of Child Protection and Child in Need.

Whilst Children were coming into care from all Wards, in North Ormesby 1 out of 17 were looked after. This was the most deprived Ward with the greatest proportion of social care intervention per head (children). However, there appeared to be very little Early Help case work (ranked 12th) in the Ward. Further work was required to understand if families arrived in North Ormesby in crisis and their level of need was too great or whether more could be done to prevent escalation.

Placements and Planning

The Panel was provided with a detailed breakdown of the numbers and types of placements provided for the current 689 Children Looked After.

It was noted that 505 children were in foster placements – 350 with Middlesbrough Foster Carers; 123 with private foster carers; and 32 in other provision. 81 children were placed at home with a parent(s) on a full or interim care order. This meant that the local authority had been concerned enough to put the case through Court and Court had deemed at the initial hearing that there was not sufficient justification to remove the child. This was the reason that a child in this position would still technically be a 'looked after' child. In some cases a child could be returning from care to home as the home situation had improved and permanence could mean going home. Work had been commissioned via 'Innovate' to support children in family placements.

Children's Services had undertaken a three-year analysis of children who became looked after. Over the three-year period, 716 children had a new episode of becoming looked after. Of those children coming into care:-

- 11.5% became looked after for a second, or subsequent, time.
- 57% had multiple referrals prior to becoming looked after.
- 67.9% had been subject to a Child Protection Plan at some point prior to becoming looked after.
- 23.5% had an Early Help intervention at some point prior to becoming looked after.

This posed the question why were children becoming looked after for a second time? Had they returned home then back to care when the home situation had deteriorated again? Similarly with multiple referrals – why had work ended with the family/child? Had their situation improved to a good enough standard for intervention to cease but then deteriorated once intervention stopped and therefore, further referrals were made?

Of the 716 children that became looked after during the three-year period, 267 (33%) ceased to be looked after for the following reasons:-

- 28.1% had a Special Guardianship Order.
- 23% had a Child Arrangement Order.
- 24.7% were moved home with parents, or someone with parental responsibility.
- 4.5% reached the age of 18.
- 6.7% were adopted.
- 3.7% had an Order discharged.

Of those 267 children that ceased to be looked after during the three-year period:-

- 76% were in short term foster care.
- 1.9% were in long term foster care.
- 10.9% were placed with parents or person with parental responsibility.
- 3% were in residential homes, supported accommodation or hostels.

Of the 716 children that became looked after over the three-year period, 449 (63%) remained in Middlesbrough's care, in the following ways:-

- 74% were in short term foster care.
- 2.2% were in long term foster care.
- 12% were placed with parents, or person with parental responsibility, on a Care Order.
- 2.9% were placed in residential homes, supported accommodation or hostels.

Of the 70 children that ceased to be looked after within the last six months, six (9%) were adopted. In terms of performance in achieving permanence through adoption, Middlesbrough had improved over the last five years, although the figure had reduced slightly over the last six month period. During 2017-18 and 2018-19, Middlesbrough was similar to the England national average for adoption and also to statistical neighbours.

The presentation also provided the Panel with data around the timeliness of each stage of the adoption process. The average timescale for those children that had completed stages one to five of the adoption process (Stage one – entering care and stage five – being placed in an adoptive placement) was 539 days. The DfE target for stages one to five was 426 days.

In summary, from the data analysed over the three year period, it indicated that:-

- Too many children were becoming looked after without effective earlier interventions to prevent them coming into care. In particular, a high proportion of new born babies were coming into care and interventions with vulnerable parents may not be effective.
- Not enough children were exiting care and reaching permanence in a timely way (it was highlighted that there had been limitations to the way permanence had been recorded and tracked to date and further work had been identified to support analysis of this area).
- There were currently too many children who remained looked after and who needed to achieve permanence in a more timely way.

To illustrate the work being undertaken to help address these issues, the Director of Children's Care advised the Panel of some significant projects that Children's Services were currently working on particularly around children in care that needed to move on and those children and young people that were on the edge of coming into care, in addition to the PAUSE project mentioned earlier.

Future for Families

Middlesbrough Council had been awarded Innovation Funding by the DfE to deliver a project in partnership with North Yorkshire Council on the Future for Families project. This consisted of a residential hub and a team of staff who would work with children on the edge of care to support them to remain with their families. The project went live at the end of August 2020.

Innovate Project

The Innovate Team was a team of high quality Social Work staff working around assessments and plans for children who were in external residential placements and needed to move back home or into foster care closer to Middlesbrough. They were also working with children who were at home on Care Orders where those Care Orders needed to be discharged and also with a cohort of children and their carers waiting to be assessed for Special Guardianship Orders in order to achieve permanence.

A discussion ensued and the following issues were raised:-

- It was queried out of the 689 children looked after, how many were placed in out of area placements and whether this figure had increased since the Ofsted inspection. The Executive Director responded that the figure had increased as the number of looked after children had increased. The Innovate Project was working on bringing children back to the Middlesbrough area, particularly residential placements. Further information in relation to this could be provided at a future meeting.
- Reference was made to the 81 children placed with parents on Care Orders, and it was queried whether Children's Services provided support to the children and whether preventative work was undertaken. The Director of Children's Care explained that whilst children were placed at home on a full Care Order, a great deal of work and oversight was provided. Children were visited in same intense way as a Child Protection plan and there was also oversight by the Court. In the case of an Interim Care Order, cases were regularly reviewed in Court to monitor progress and all Children's Services work would be ongoing.
- It was queried whether parents, particularly single parents, might be reluctant to contact Children's Services for help for fear of the possibility that their child/children may be removed from them. The Executive Director explained that Early Help services were much easier to access through a variety of pathways including midwives, schools, etc, and as they were non-statutory, families tended to be more willing to engage with services.
- Reference was made to the Multi Agency Children's Hub (MACH), which was the 'front door' of Children's Services. It was queried whether there was a waiting list for families who were identified in the MACH as requiring extra support. In response, the Panel was informed that the MACH was the first point of referral into Children's Services, including self-referrals. The referral would then be screened and a decision would be made as to the best route for the family. The referral would go to Early Help if there were no concerns that a statutory threshold was being met. Within Early Help, the Family Casework Team would meet the family to complete the My Family Plan. As Early Help was a voluntary service, families tended to feel more comfortable to make contact and engage with the support. Where a statutory threshold was being met, the referral would be progressed to a statutory service for a single assessment to be completed and this would be done and support would be offered either via Child in Need or as part of a Child Protection Plan. On some occasions, concerns would be so great that the child would need to be removed and become looked after.
- In response to a query as to whether there was currently a waiting list for this service, it was confirmed that a decision was made on all referrals within 24 hours as to which route it needed to be progressed to and a Social Worker or Early Help Practitioner was allocated.
- A Panel Member requested that the Panel be provided with a map showing where children looked after were being placed and felt it was important to ensure that children were not being removed for one chaotic environment and being placed in an equally chaotic environment. The Executive Director acknowledged that this was a valid point and that the authority needed to consider where it was placing children but also whether it had a choice in where children were being placed due to placement sufficiency.
- A Member asked whether the Executive Director felt that Middlesbrough had a sufficient number of foster carers in Middlesbrough and the current position with regard to foster carer recruitment. The Director advised that all available foster carers in Middlesbrough were fully utilised and that independent foster carer placements were only used when there was not an available Middlesbrough foster carer placement available, or where there was a specific need that could only be met by an independent carer. In terms of recruitment, there were currently 11 households going through the assessment process and recruitment of new carers was a continual process. Recruitment was also being undertaken for Futures for Families for young people on the edge of care.
- A Panel Member made reference to the Futures for Families hub and asked for an update. The Executive Director explained that the Futures for Families project worked with children on the edge of care to prevent them becoming looked after. The hub building did have a residential

element for very short term placements/respite and was not intended for long term placements. The Director alluded to a virtual tour that would soon be available that may be of interest to Members.

- In response to a question regarding Social Workers, the Panel was informed that there was currently a number of agency social workers within the Service due to difficulty in recruiting to posts. This reflected the national picture. A workforce strategy was under development and a recruitment and retention campaign would form part of that, however, it was acknowledged that additional permanent Social Workers would be welcome.

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

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

SUFFICIENCY AND PERMANENCY (PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN CARE) – FURTHER INFORMATION

One element of the Panel's current scrutiny topic was to address perceptions of children in care and to provide the Panel with a greater understanding of a child/young person's pathway through Children's Social care from the child's perspective.

One of the Panel's Members, Councillor Cooke, had volunteered to share his own story and experiences of his pathway through Children's Social Care.

Councillor Cooke stated that he and his younger sibling had been taken into care following a long period of neglect and abuse. They were initially placed with a number of different family members. Whilst in theory it might seem the best thing for a child to be placed with extended family, it could also be difficult taking on two additional children when the enormity and responsibility of the task was realised, often resulting in several moves for the child.

Councillor Cooke explained that he had lived in a number of foster placements until he was eventually fostered by carers who came out of retirement to care for him and his sibling, as it had not been possible to find suitable foster carers for both siblings. Councillor Cooke stated that he remembered it being made obvious at the time that he was 'the problem' as he was approaching 13 years of age and was viewed as being too old to be fostered long term.

Councillor Cooke stated that whilst people tended to form certain perceptions of children that were in care, there was also the period of time before a child became looked after when they would often be experiencing great difficulties. He recalled that appearance was something that was often raised and he felt strongly that young people should not be judged by their appearance. He explained that in the period before being taken into care he owned two outfits - his school uniform and one other outfit to wear at home. He learned to sew in order to keep both outfits in good repair and to ensure they were clean and tidy.

He also recalled hearing people refer to groups of young people as a 'gang' or 'group of yobs'. Some young people in care gathered together as they were in similar circumstances and did this in order to feel secure and to feel part of something. Sometimes the groups could appear rowdy but they were not trying to intimidate people or intending to be loud but this was often the only way their voice would be heard.

Councillor Cooke welcomed the transition to work placements for young people that had been touched upon at the previous meeting to ensure that additional support was being given to young people in care, or care leavers, to assist in gaining apprenticeships and employment.

He considered it essential for people to have empathy and to think about things from the young person's perspective as many had been through, or were going through, very difficult times. Councillor Cooke stated that both he and his sibling had gone on to be successful in their chosen careers and felt that certain Social Workers, teachers and foster carers who had shown empathy and picked up on things when they did not seem quite right had greatly contributed to this.

The Panel raised several issues as follows:-

- A Panel Member thanked Councillor Cooke for sharing his experiences and considered that too many people were too quick to judge and that everyone needed to have more empathy for our children looked after.
- A Member commented that everyone needed to have empathy and to understand children in our care in the community that might have experienced challenging circumstances. It was queried whether Councillor Cooke was able to comment on some of the other children around him that might have suffered adversely from some of the unsympathetic comments or treatment. Councillor Cooke explained that one of the streets he grew up in, had several foster families and children living there and that the children and families would all meet and have the chance to share their experiences. Unfortunately he was aware of some foster children that had not been allowed into some of the homes merely because of their surname and because of issues with siblings/other members of the child's family. This had happened to one particular ten-year-old who had struggled to be placed due to issues with a sibling. The individual had struggled at school and had been viewed as being the same as their sibling, which had not been the case.
- In response to a question, Councillor Cooke recalled feeling terrified of Social Services and had tried to hide the issues at home whilst he effectively ran the house. Their situation eventually came to light when the fire brigade had attended a false alarm at the family home and witnessed the chaotic situation. Councillor Cooke stated that, knowing what he knew now, he wished he had asked for help sooner. This highlighted the importance of emergency services being aware of such issues and knowing how to deal with them.
- Reference was made to a Radio 4 documentary series entitled 'Can She Keep This Baby?' The programmes followed a child protection case in relation to a mother who had given birth to her tenth baby, having had her nine previous children removed. The series may be of interest to the Panel to give an insight into the case from the perspectives of the Social Worker and the Mum.

The Chair thanked Councillor Cooke for sharing his personal experiences with the Panel and giving some insight into how it is for children and young people living in difficult circumstances and coming into care.

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

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

A verbal update was provided in relation to the business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 1 October 2020, namely:-

- Mayor's Update – Covid-19 and Council's finances.
- Executive forward work programme.
- Middlesbrough Council Covid-19 update – Chief Executive and Director of Public Health.
- Executive Member Update – Finance and Governance
- Covid and Finance Update – Executive Member for Finance and Governance; Director of Finance and Director of Legal and Governance.
- Scrutiny Chairs' Updates.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

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, 9 November 2020 at 4.00pm.