

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

A meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel was held on 21 June 2022.

PRESENT: Councillor Davison (Chair); Councillors: Higgins, Nugent, Uddin and Wilson.

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

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

**** DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

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

MINUTES – 26 APRIL 2022

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel held on 26 April 2022 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

The Executive Director of Children's Services was in attendance at the meeting to provide the Panel with a broad overview of the services within Children's Services that fell within the Panel's remit and to also highlight the key priorities, issues and challenges for the Service for the year ahead.

The Panel was already familiar with the 'Middlesbrough Children Matter' branding for Children's Services which was a key priority to show all children in Middlesbrough that they mattered.

Within Children's Services staffing structure there was a Director of Education and Partnerships, a Director of Children's Care and a Head of Strategic Services – all working together as one Service. Education and Partnerships worked across the whole service and Children's Social Care promoted better outcomes for vulnerable children. Children were safest in schools and the education of children looked after was supported through the virtual school. The Head of Strategic Services supported the Directors in relation to improvement work, such as managing the Improvement Board and Improvement Plan, and having general oversight of audit.

It was acknowledged that there was a separate Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel whose remit largely fell within the Education and Partnerships element of the Service, therefore, in terms of this Panel's remit, details of the Heads of Service within Children's Social Care were provided as follows:-

- Head of Early Help and Prevention – Responsible for early help provision pre and post Social Work involvement to support vulnerable families.
- Head of Referral and Assessment – Responsible for the Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH) and the Assessment Teams. (The MACH was the 'front door' of the Service where referrals were received. When a referral met the threshold for social care intervention, it was allocated to the Assessment Teams for an initial single assessment).
- Head of Safeguarding and Care Planning – Responsible for Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams and Frontline Teams (working to prevent care proceedings where appropriate and on Court safeguarding work).
- Head of Looked After Children and Corporate Parenting – Responsible for Looked After Children Teams and Pathways (Care Leavers') service.
- Head of Futures for Families – Responsible for Futures for Families (No Wrong Door model) (hub provided respite and edge of care work); Residential Children's Homes and the Fostering Service.

- Head of Children with Disabilities – Responsible for Children with Disabilities Service and oversight of Practice Leads (including the Lead for the Independent Reviewing Officers) who were exploring how to further improve practice.
- Principal Social Worker – Responsible for Centre for Practice Excellence (including Audit to Excellence, Training, Social Work Academy).
- Head of Strategic Services – Responsible for Oversight of Performance and Quality; Inspection Preparation; Participation; Safeguarding Partnership (Middlesbrough and Redcar & Cleveland).

The Panel heard that Children's Services' Strategic Priorities 2022-24 aimed to show 'Middlesbrough Children that they Matter' by working to make the town safe and welcoming and to improve outcomes for all children and young people, by:-

- Expanding the current youth provision model in areas suffering high levels of deprivation.
- Evidencing that Middlesbrough Council listened to children's voices.
- Consolidating and building on recent progress in Children's Services to improve its Ofsted rating.
- Exploring the potential for the establishment of an Eton college in Middlesbrough.
- Delivering and extending the '50 Futures' programme.

Directorate priorities included a number of strategies to be delivered, as follows:-

- Participation
- Workforce
- Early Help and Prevention
- Placement Sufficiency
- Pupil Placement Strategy
- SEND Strategy
- Community Learning Strategy
- Learning and Education Strategy

In addition to the delivery of the above strategies, Children's Services' priorities for the year ahead included:-

- Targeting young people who were NEET (not in education, employment or training).
- Delivering the Inclusion and Specialist Strategic Plan.
- Working with schools and partners to help school improvement and support educational outcomes in Middlesbrough.
- Delivering a refreshed Youth Justice Plan aligned to the Youth Justice Board's 'Child First' principle.

Further priorities across the Service as a whole included embedding the Council's corporate values within the directorate and to make staff feel more valued; improving staff communication so that staff felt more engaged; and delivering all budgeted savings initiatives and maintaining spending within set limits.

In addition to Strategic and Directorate priorities, the Panel was informed that there were three important national initiatives:-

- Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child (White Paper).
- SEND Review: right support, right place, right time (Green Paper).
- Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

The main issues and challenges for Children's Services over the coming year were identified as follows:-

- Improving Outcomes for vulnerable children and young people in Middlesbrough:-
 - Under intense scrutiny from Ofsted, DfE and internally;

- Mechanisms for improvement, such as the Improvement Board, Ofsted Monitoring Visits, DfE reviews, all required rigorous preparation.
- High demand for Children's Services in Middlesbrough due to demographics.
- Workforce Stability. Recruitment and retention of experienced, permanent social workers was a national issue and could impact on staff morale.
- Finances – the cost of agency staff and rising costs of external residential placements. (Whilst the number of external residential placements had reduced, the cost of existing placements had increased with inflation).
- Growing and developing 'Partnership Working'.
- Roll out of 'Middlesbrough Children Matter' across the town.

In response to the presentation, the following issues were raised:-

- In response to an expression of interest from a Panel Member in relation to attending one of the Children's Services weekly staff briefing sessions, the Executive Director extended an invitation for all Panel Members should they wish to attend. The Chair requested that any Panel Members interested in attending should inform the Democratic Services Officer and arrangements would be made accordingly for one Panel Member to attend each briefing.
- In response to a query regarding responsibility for private children's residential homes, the Executive Director stated that the Council was not responsible for overseeing private residential homes, however, it did have responsibility for its own residential homes all of which were rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted.
- A query was raised regarding the Safeguarding Partnership and it was confirmed that the Partnership operated on a south-tees basis across Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland bringing together key agencies such as the local authorities, Police, Health and voluntary organisations to look at particular issues in those areas in addition to sharing information on performance and progress across all agencies. It was highlighted that a Safeguarding Newsletter had been established and arrangements would be made to circulate to the Panel, and all Members of the Council.
- It was highlighted that in addition to the South Tees Safeguarding Children's Partnership, Tees-wide procedures were in place so that all of the Tees Valley local authorities followed the same procedures in relation to a wide range of issues, for example young people at risk of suicide, teen pregnancy management, etc and Middlesbrough shared other services with Redcar and Cleveland including the Youth Offending Service.
- A Member of the Panel asked what progress had been made in relation to the recruitment and retention programme for Social Workers. The Director of Children's Care responded that she was leading on the Workforce Strategy and that recruitment and retention of social workers was a challenge locally, regionally and nationally. Some progress had been made in recruiting permanent staff and reducing the numbers of agency staff by trying to make caseloads more manageable, providing better support from managers and a having a good learning and development offer. Middlesbrough's Centre for Practice Excellence continued to develop and Members were advised that newly qualified social workers now stayed within the academy for six months with small caseloads so that once they were allocated to their teams they were much more prepared and confident. The academy ensured that newly qualified social workers received good supervision and support in order to get the best start possible as a social worker. This would be a key component in growing Middlesbrough's own permanent workforce and there had already been some significant success.
- In response to a query regarding partnership working, the Panel heard that Middlesbrough had secured three well-regarded voluntary organisations as part of its youth service contract – The Junction; Linx; and Middlesbrough Football Club Foundation – each providing a variety of services and support to young people and young carers.

- The Chair advised that she had been invited to attend the Middlesbrough Children Matter conference and queried whether all Members would be welcome to attend. It was confirmed that all Members would be welcome to attend the event to promote and celebrate Middlesbrough Children Matter.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their attendance and informative presentation.

AGREED that the overview of Children's Services be noted.

SETTING THE SCRUTINY PANEL'S WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2022/23

The Democratic Services Officer submitted a report inviting Members to consider and agree its Work Programme for the 2022/23 Municipal Year.

A list of topical issues, anticipated to be of interest to the Panel, and the suggestions received in respect of the Scrutiny Panel's remit were contained in the report.

Members were advised that the topical issues and suggestions outlined in the report were merely proposals and the content of the work programme was entirely a decision for the Panel to make.

The Panel was encouraged to select two topics where scrutiny could make an impact, add value or contribute to policy development.

The Panel was reminded that it could also identify shorter 'one-off' topics and receive any relevant updates throughout the year as it considered necessary.

A recap of the work undertaken by the Panel throughout 2021/22 was contained at Paragraph 5 of the report.

Paragraph 12 of the report set out the key considerations when agreeing to include a specific topic on the work programme. The Panel's chosen topics for inclusion in its Work Programme would be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Board for approval.

The Panel held a discussion in relation to the suggested topics within the report and selected the following for the inclusion in its Work Programme:-

Review topics:-

1. Supporting young people in their transition to adulthood – effectiveness of support services.
2. Policy, Process and Procedures of Child Protection Plan/Child in Need/Early Intervention Support to Middlesbrough's "birth" families.
3. Strategic Plan Work plan 2022-24 – To create and deliver a strategy to increase digital inclusion for children, young people and adults across Middlesbrough.

Updates:-

1. OFSTED inspections
2. South Tees Safeguarding Children's Partnership
3. Performance information
4. Previous Review - Sufficiency and Permanency (Perceptions of Children in Care)
5. Previous Review - Locality Working from a Children's Services Perspective

AGREED that the topics, as listed above, be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Board for approval and inclusion in the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel's work programme for 2022/2023.

UPDATE – CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY

The Executive Director of Children's Services provided the Panel with an update in relation to the

most recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit which took place on 29 and 30 March 2022.

The visit was the third monitoring visit (plus a focused visit) since the last full inspection and was the first to take place 'face to face' following the lifting of Covid restrictions.

The areas covered were:-

- Matching, placement and decision-making for children in care.
- Planning and achieving permanence for children.

Inspectors found that Children's Services 'knew themselves' and this was evidenced by its detailed improvement plan and accurate self-assessment (SEF). This had been achieved through:-

- Quality Assurance processes.
- Robust reviewing processes and panels.
- Audits with a crucial learning loop.
- The Centre for Practice Excellence is a central focus for collating learning and improvement.

In terms of permanence – or 'forever homes for children', inspectors found:-

- A systemic framework for permanency planning – less reactive and more forward-looking.
- Stronger practice with children who had more recently come into care planning with more thought about early permanence planning.
- Permanency plans now included parallel planning to avoid drift and delay for children.
- Social Workers knew children needed permanence and what was required to achieve it.
- Regular and high quality supervision actively contributing to early permanence planning.
- Monthly Permanence Monitoring Group (PMG) meetings track and quality assure both plans and progression towards permanence.

The positives that came from the Monitoring Visit were summarised as follows:-

- Children in care were visited regularly.
- Most Social Workers knew their children well and had built trusting relationships with them.
- Good direct work which was age appropriate.
- Children's voices were informing their planning.
- Family time ensured:-
 - Children benefitted from safely assessed family time.
 - Family time with wider family members was well considered.
 - Sibling 'Together or Apart' assessments were completed quickly and relationships were maintained if they could not live together.
- Children were brought into care in a more timely way through better Court applications.
- Good feedback from the local judiciary and CAFCASS.
- Child Permanence reports were sensitively written.
- Social Workers understood the need for children to have life story work in order to understand their parentage and identity as they grew up.
- Children's records were written directly to the child by Social Workers who knew them.
- Children were able to see the thought that went into planning for their forever homes.
- Planning – evidence showed:-
 - Care planning meetings, supervision sessions, reviews and legal gateway were all well recorded forums for reflective and creative thinking. They provided clear oversight of the plans and actions for the best interests of children, therefore, children experienced less delay.
 - Independent Reviewing Officers had improved oversight of children's plans and there was evidence of mid-point reviews being carried out to consider whether plans were progressing.

Whilst there were many positives identified during the monitoring visit, some areas requiring further consideration were identified as follows:-

- There was still some impact on children from a legacy of absent or poor planning.
- Some children had experienced earlier unplanned placement moves and consequent disruption and instability.
- There were a number of children placed with family members who had not been assessed and approved as connected foster carers.
- There were a minority of children with complex needs in unregistered children's homes awaiting a suitably matched, regulated placement. The carer's ability to meet their needs was undetermined and unregulated. (The Panel was assured that whilst a small number of children were placed in homes that were not regulated by Ofsted, Ofsted were satisfied that those children were safe and that the local authority had oversight).
- However, leaders were aware of these children and all had individual assessments and cumulative oversight to mitigate against risk.

The findings from the Monitoring Visit in relation to people was:-

- Senior leaders knew their services well.
- Social Workers spoke positively about the determined efforts to make improvements and create the conditions for good social work practice through clear expectations and standards.
- They valued:-
 - Support from their team members
 - Training and development programme.
 - Growing a supportive working culture.

The next steps would include:-

- DfE Review – Representatives had met with frontline staff on 17 May and would meet partners and corporate leaders in June/July.
- Ofsted Monitoring Visit – This would take place mid-July and would focus on Early Help, MACH and the Assessment Service.

In response to a query, the Panel was advised that there were currently 513 Children Looked After in Middlesbrough and that this had fallen from an all-time high of 702. Of those 513 children, 49 were placed in external residential provision and 21 were placed in internal residential provision, therefore, the majority of children looked after were placed with foster carers. Significant improvements had been made to reduce the use of external residential provision by increasing the numbers of in-house foster carers and reducing the number of external foster placements used.

The Chair thanked the Executive Director for the informative update and stated she was particularly pleased to hear that children in care kept in touch with their siblings and grandparents where it was safe for them to do so and that work had progressed in reducing the number of external placements.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

The Chair provided the Panel with a verbal update in relation to the business conducted by the Overview and Scrutiny Board on 11 May 2022, namely:-

- Executive forward work programme.
- Executive Member Update – Councillor Hill - Executive Member for Young Adults & Political Engagement and Councillor Grange, Executive Member for Neighbourhood Safety.
- Chief Executive Update.
- School Exclusions – Feedback from school visits
- Final report of the Children & Young People's Social Care & Services Scrutiny Panel – Sufficiency and Permanency

- Final report of the Children & Young People's Social Care & Services Scrutiny Panel – Locality Working from a Children's Services perspective
- Next OSB meeting – Wednesday, 22 June 2022 at 10.00am

NOTED**PROPOSED SCHEDULE OF MEETING DATES FOR THE 2022/23 MUNICIPAL YEAR**

A proposed schedule of meeting dates for Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel for the 2022/23 Municipal Year was submitted for the Panel's consideration.

It was proposed that meetings would take place on Tuesdays at 10.00am, however, a Panel Member advised that this would prevent his attendance for the majority of meetings due to work commitments.

It was, therefore, agreed that the Democratic Services Officer would attempt to identify alternative dates and to circulate the new dates to the Panel.

AGREED that the schedule of meeting dates be revised and circulated to all Panel Members in due course.