

Report of:	Deputy Mayor and Executive Member for Children's Services Director of Children's Services
Submitted to:	Executive
Date:	6 September 2022
Title:	Final Report of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel - Sufficiency and Permanency (Perceptions of Children in Care) - Service Response
Report for:	Decision
Status:	Public
Strategic priority:	Children and young people
Key decision:	No
Why:	Decision does not reach the threshold to be a key decision
Urgent:	No
Why:	N/A

Executive summary

This report gives an overview of the investigation by the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel to examine placement availability, local sufficiency, permanency outcomes and how perceptions of children in care can be improved.

The implications of these recommendations and decisions within the report have been considered by the appropriate officers within the Children's Care directorate of the Council and are set out in the Action Plan.

The recommendation is that the Executive approves the report and its recommendations (Appendix 1 and 2) and the resulting action plan (Appendix 3).

The Executive could decide not to approve the report and therefore it's recommendations and action plan, however this may lead to a missed opportunity to

improve services for children in care relating to placement availability, local sufficiency, permanency outcomes and how perception of children in care.

Purpose

1. To seek the Executive's approval of the final report of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Committee "Report from the Children and Young Peoples Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel, Sufficiency and Permanency (Perception of Children in Care)' (appendix 1), Addendum to Final Report Sufficiency and Permanency (Perception of Children in Care) dated 11 May 2022 (appendix 2) and Action Plan (appendix 3)

Background and relevant information

2. The Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel have considered children in our care, placement availability, local sufficiency, permanency outcomes and how perceptions of children in care can be improved.
3. The Scrutiny Panel's investigation focussed on several key areas as follows;
 - **Children Looked After**
To examine and compare the profile of Middlesbrough's Children Looked After population against national and statistical neighbours and to examine placement types and performance.
 - **Foster Care**
To establish a profile of Middlesbrough's foster carers, including current recruitment and retention initiatives and to examine the availability of placements for Children Looked After in Middlesbrough.
 - **Permanency**
To investigate the issues around permanency, including adoption, and to examine any initiatives and areas of best practice.
 - **Perception**
To challenge people's perceptions of children in care and to create a better understanding of Children Looked After for everyone involved in the process.
4. As Corporate Parents, all Councillors have a responsibility to ensure that the Council is meeting statutory duties towards all children in it's care and care leavers in accordance with relevant legislation including The Children Act 2004 and Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018.
5. The Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel have proposed a number of recommendations. The implications of these recommendations have been considered by the appropriate officers within the Children's Care directorate of the Council and are set out in the Action Plan attached (appendix 3).

What decision(s) are being recommended?

6. It is recommended that Executive approves the sixteen recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Board 'Report from the Children and Young Peoples Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel, Sufficiency and Permanency (Perception of Children in Care) – Action Plan' (appendix 3)

Recommendations

7. Based on the evidence gathered during the investigation, and the conclusions made, the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel made the following recommendations for consideration by the Executive as follows:
 - 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.

Rationale for the recommended decision(s)

- 8. The rationale for the recommended decision is to improve placement availability, local sufficiency and permanency outcomes and how perceptions of children in our care can be improved. Based on the evidence gathered during the investigation by the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel, sixteen recommendations were made for consideration by Executive.

Other potential decision(s) and why these have not been recommended

- 9. For Executive to not approve the proposed actions detailed within appendix 3. This has not been recommended as the proposed action plan will support improvements in placement availability, local sufficiency and permanency outcomes and perceptions of children in our care.

Impact(s) of the recommended decision(s)

Legal

- 10. All actions that are required as a result of the approval of these recommendations will be completed in accordance with relevant legislation including Statutory Guidance, "Working Together to Safeguard Children" which sets out the core legal requirements for Local Authorities and partner agencies and what they must do to keep children safe.

Strategic priorities and risks

- 11. These recommendations will directly support the delivery of the Council's Strategic Priorities.

Human Rights, Equality and Data Protection

- 12. Protected groups would not be adversely affected by this decision.

Financial

- 13. There is no proposed financial implications identified within the action plan. All actions will be completed within the current resources and budget.

Actions to be taken to implement the recommended decision(s)

Action	Responsible Officer	Date
To implement recommendations detailed within the action plan (appendix 3)	Rachel Farnham, Director of Children's Social Care	6 September 2022

Appendices

1	Final Report. Sufficiency and Permanency (Perceptions of Children in Care) dated 11 May 2022
2	Addendum to Final Report Sufficiency and Permanency (Perception of Children in Care) dated 11 May 2022
3	Report from the Children and Young Peoples Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel, Sufficiency and Permanency (Perception of Children in Care)' – Action Plan.

Background papers

Body	Report title	Date

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