

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 27 September 2022.

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

OFFICERS: S Bonner, S Butcher, J Dixon, R Farnham and P Jemson.

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

**** DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

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

MINUTES – 26 JULY 2022

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

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD – FURTHER INFORMATION

P Jemson, Head of Looked After Children and Corporate Parenting, and R Farnham, Director of Children's Care, were in attendance at the meeting to provide the Panel with further information in relation to its current scrutiny topic, specifically in relation to the support provided to young people by the Pathways (Leaving Care) Service.

The Panel was informed that the Pathways (Leaving Care) Service supported care leavers, including young people with disabilities, to live successful, independent lives. A care leaver was defined as a young person who had been in the care of the local authority for a period of 13 weeks or more, spanning their sixteenth birthday.

In Middlesbrough, the Pathways Service consisted of two teams – each with a Team Managers and Assistant Team Manager – six Social Workers assigned to young people aged 15 years and three months, and nine Personal Advisors working with young people aged 16-25.

In accordance with Section 3 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017, local authorities were required to provide Personal Advisors to care leavers up to the age of 25. Their role was to help young people to positively transition to adulthood by:-

- Providing advice (including practical advice) and support to the young person.
- Participating in reviews of the young person's case.
- Liaising with the responsible authority in the implementation of the pathway plan.
- Co-ordinating the provision of services.
- Keeping informed about the young person's progress and well-being.
- Maintaining full, accurate, up to date records of contacts with the young person and services provided.
- Providing information about financial capability and how to manage daily finances.
- Providing housing options available to the care leaver.
- Supporting the young person to find further education, employment or training.
- Keeping in touch with the young person.

In accordance with the national minimum standard, Personal Advisors kept in touch with the young person (from age 18 onwards) every eight weeks. If a young person had more complex needs or needed additional support, contact was more frequent and could be daily in some cases.

Every eligible care leaver had the right to a Needs Assessment. This assessment was completed by a Social Worker when the young person was 16 years old and included consideration of their independent living skills and ability to manage their own finances. The aim of the assessment was to ensure they left care at a time that was right for them. Relevant children had a Pathway Plan, setting out the support that would be provided to them once they had left care and the Plan must be based on the completed Needs Assessment. The plan was reviewed every six months.

Pathway Plans included the following:-

- The nature and level of contact and personal support to be provided.
- The young person's health needs and how they should be met.
- Arrangements to support the young person in further education or employment. (Support to engage and/or maintain engagement).
- Arrangements to support the young person in sustaining and developing family relationships. (Helping young people to maintain focus on keeping in touch with people who were important to them, such as parents, siblings, friends, etc).
- Arrangements to ensure the young person was properly equipped for taking greater responsibility towards independence.
- As assessment of the young person's financial needs and capacity and any financial assistance to be provided. (A financial assessment was undertaken and guidance to ensure the young person was aware of their entitlements).
- Arrangements to ensure the young person was living in suitable accommodation.
- Any 'Staying Put' arrangements. (Once young people in foster care reached the age of 18, discussions would take place with their carers regarding 'staying put'. There were currently 25 young people living in 'staying put' arrangements).

The Panel was advised that in October 2020, following consultation with young people, the 'Local Offer for Care Leavers in Middlesbrough' was created. The Local Offer provided information for Middlesbrough's care experienced young people in relation to entitlements and support available to them to help in all aspects of their adult lives. The document was in the process of being reviewed and updated to ensure it remained relevant to the needs of Middlesbrough's young people.

The areas of support within the Local Offer included:-

- Relationships
- Education and Training
- Employment
- Emotional Wellbeing
- Health and Wellbeing
- Accommodation
- Finances
- Participation

In terms of supporting young people to become independent, Pathways Plans were developed for each care leaver – setting out their needs, views, goals and what support they would receive.

It was highlighted that Pathway planning was key to identifying the individual's needs together with the local offer, and the Pathways Service supported young people to become independent, particularly in the following areas:-

Becoming Independent:-

- Access to financial support, depending on need.
- Computer and internet access.
- Support to open a bank account.
- Support to be provided with a form of ID, such as passport, birth certificate or driving licence.
- Access to money management support in order to develop budgeting skills.

- Personal allowance. (Young people aged over 16 living in supported accommodation were not entitled to benefits so were provided with a personal allowance).
- Financial assistance for university students.
- Invitations to social groups. (A weekly social group met at the Pathways Service building offering support and a range of activities such as movie nights and cooking classes).
- Care Leavers Forum to provide an arena for young people's views to be heard, supporting service development.

It was highlighted that the Pathways (Leaving Care) Service was based at a dedicated building in Park Road North and welcomed care leavers at any time. The building had a fully equipped kitchen and shower room and staff were always on hand to spend time with young people and to help them.

Employment, Education and Training:-

- A 'NEET Panel' (not in employment, education and training) had been established and was Chaired by the Head of the Virtual School. The Panel brought together partners to provide guidance to staff on how best to support young people with employment, education and training opportunities and also considered each young person identified as being 'NEET' and explored ways to support them into employment, education or training.
- Work Readiness Support. One to one support was provided by the Work Readiness Team.
- Guaranteed interview for jobs and apprenticeships. Middlesbrough Council guaranteed interviews into apprenticeships and jobs for those with care experience.
- Support to: access bursaries, purchase college equipment, produce CVs, purchase clothing for interviews.
- Help to understand rights and entitlements.
- Work Experience opportunities. (The Council's 50 Futures Team offered work experience in certain areas).
- Additional financial support to ensure that there was a financial benefit to working.
- Support with travel to interviews. (Young people would be transported to and from interviews where required or helped to obtain a suitable bus pass).
- Support to attend local job fairs and college open days.
- Work with Adult Care Social Workers to access services for young people with disabilities.

Health:-

- A dedicated CAMHS Worker (Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service) was based within the Pathways Team, offering additional emotional wellbeing support. (This was recognised as good practice nationally).
- Support with referrals to other agencies.
- Support to attend medical appointments and speak to the doctor. (Can advocate with health professionals on behalf of young person with their consent).
- Free access to Middlesbrough leisure services.
- A health passport with key information about the young person's health. (Once the young person reached 18 years, the Children Looked After Health Service provided them with their health document containing their medical history, family history, etc)
- Access to C Cards.
- Support to register with a doctor, dentist and optician.
- Advice and guidance regarding LGBT issues and signposting to support services.
- Work with allocated Adult Care Social Worker or Health Lead Professional if young adult with disabilities.

Housing:-

- 'Staying Put' allowed young people to remain with their foster carers beyond the age of 18.
- Access to Supported Lodgings provision. (If deemed appropriate for the young person. A Young Person's Housing Panel comprising of housing providers met with Pathways staff to

consider referrals once a young person was approaching the age of 18 so that the most appropriate route could be discussed and considered).

- Council tax exemption up to the age of 25. (This currently applied to care leavers living independently in Middlesbrough, however, work was ongoing to explore the possibility of extending this provision into neighbouring local authorities).
- Setting up home allowance. (Help to buy equipment such as white goods and furniture up to £2,000 with responsible spending advice provided).
- Support with removal costs.
- An in-house unregulated support accommodation provision - Daniel Court - for young people over the age of 16, comprising of self-contained flats for up to nine young people.
- A regulated in-house care provision – Rosecroft - for young people over the age of 16 to support a gradual transition to an independent flat where they would be supported to be responsible for the tenancy and live with floating support at a pace meeting their needs. (Rosecroft was able to support up to five young people and was designed for those whose independence skills were less developed. Once the young person felt comfortable they were supported to move into a flat to live independently but with continued support. Positive outcomes had been achieved for young people through both provisions at Daniel Court and Rosecroft).

Finances:-

- As previously mentioned there was a local Council Tax exemption up to the age of 25, a setting up home allowance of up to £2,000 and support with removal costs.
- A personal allowance of £66.66 per week for young people aged over 16 years living in supported accommodation. (This was in lieu of benefit entitlement. There was a structured programme of independence support for young people living in Daniel Court and Rosecroft which included budgeting skills and one to one advice from Personal Advisors).
- Financial assistance for university students, higher education bursary including a tuition free loan and maintenance loan from student finance departments. An additional bursary was provided by the local authority three times per year.
- A weekly allowance of £66.66 for university students living away from home.
- A further £40 housing support grant to assist with the purchase of groceries.

During the course of discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel Member commented that there appeared to be a comprehensive package of support provided to care leavers in Middlesbrough and felt that the Pathways Service was doing a good job.
- Reference was made to contact every eight weeks between the Personal Advisors and young people allocated to them and it was queried whether contact was ever more frequent. The Panel was advised that at 18 years and over, contact every eight weeks was the national minimum standard, however, depending on need, some young people would have contact more frequently.
- In response to a query regarding caseloads of the Personal Advisors, it was stated that on average Personal Advisors had between 18 and 23 young people assigned to them. Their caseloads were monitored by the Improvement Board and the target was to not exceed 23, therefore, this target was currently being met.
- The Panel asked for an example of how young people are helped with budgeting their own finances. It was explained that the ideal time to start supporting young people with budgeting skills was around 12-14 years, starting with saving pocket money into a bank account. For young people living in supported accommodation, such as Daniel Court or Rosecroft, they contributed towards household bills (such as fuel and food) and this was deducted from their benefit allowance. These budgeting skills were developed with their Key Worker on a weekly basis so that at age 18 they understood and were prepared for independence.

- It was queried whether Daniel Court was designed for single young people and whether the local authority ever supported couples to move to independent living. The Panel was advised that up to nine young people were able to live within Daniel Court at any one time, each living in a single-person flat. It was unlikely that young people would be supported to live together and the local authority would also avoid moving a single young person in to a two bedroomed flat.
- A Panel Member queried whether care leavers were guaranteed suitable, secure accommodation with the opportunity to develop. In response, the Panel was advised that the Pathways Service worked closely with housing providers to ensure that appropriate accommodation was identified and this was considered by the Young People's Housing Panel. There were some challenges including a small cohort of young people with very complex needs following traumatic experiences, who found it difficult to hold down a tenancy, however, there were performance measures in place around this to ensure that those young people were well-supported. It could be difficult for housing providers to identify suitable accommodation in such cases where young people displayed risky behaviours.
- In response to a query as to which agencies the service worked with, it was confirmed that Middlesbrough's preferred and regional providers included Single Key, Community Campus, Erimus Housing and Thirteen.
- It was queried how many young people attended the social groups previously mentioned. The Panel was informed that the weekly social group at the Pathways building operated on a 'drop in' basis so the numbers could vary at different times. The cook and eat sessions were particularly popular. 12 young people recently visited Flamingo Land with the social group and a barbeque held in the summer was attended by around 12 young people. One of the participation groups had recently held a picnic. There were currently four young people who were permanent members of the Care Leavers Forum. This was working well and they were helping to look at alternative ways of engaging other young people such as by text or social media. Recruitment to the Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Forum remained ongoing but was a challenge.
- It was highlighted that Pathways staff had provided a Christmas lunch on Christmas Day at the Pathways building and had transported the young people there. This was very well received and was important for those young people who might otherwise have spent Christmas Day alone.
- It was further highlighted that the Pathways service worked with some of the most challenged and/or challenging young people and were dedicated to safeguarding them. Those young people with significant issues would have an Adult Care Social Worker allocated to them once they reached 18 and a Transition Panel oversaw the move from Children to Adult Social Care, as they still remained a care leaver.
- An annual care leavers celebration event was also held with awards and gifts to which all care leavers were invited and each individual would be recognised for at least one of their achievements. The Chair requested that Panel Members be invited to attend the next event.

The Chair thanked the Officer for attending and providing a very informative presentation.

AGREED that the information provided be noted and considered in the context of the Panel's current scrutiny topic 'Supporting Young People in the Transition to Adulthood'.

UPDATE – OFSTED MONITORING VISIT

The Executive Director of Children's Services was in attendance to provide the Panel with an update in relation to the most recent Ofsted monitoring visit carried out on 13 and 14 July 2022.

A copy of Ofsted's findings, in its letter published 17 August 2022, was attached to the agenda for Members' information.

The visit was the fourth Monitoring Visit (plus a focused assurance visit in July 2021) to Middlesbrough's Children's Services, with two Inspectors reviewing progress made since the last full inspection in relation to:-

- The 'front door' of the service where contacts and referrals are received.
- Child Protection enquiries.
- Early Help assessments.
- Step-up and Step-down to Early Help.

A number of positive headline findings were identified as follows:-

- Front door services had continued to develop and improve (overseen by the multi-agency Improvement Board that met every six weeks).
- Robust and comprehensive quality assurance programme ensuring leaders had an accurate understanding of practice and its impact on children and families, with expansion of the offer of Early Help support to vulnerable children.
- Stronger and wider partnerships within the MACH (Multi-Agency Children's Hub). This had led to:-
 - Improved quality of information.
 - Richness of information-sharing.
 - Better informed decision making.

The areas identified as needing more focus included:-

- Workforce instability and increased demand in the assessment service which had slowed down throughput.
- Additional pressure on some Social Workers' caseloads and quality of practice.
- Unfinished assessments and incomplete records had led to delays and risks being fully assessed for some children.

The Executive Director advised that in terms of workforce stability, it remained a challenge to recruit to permanent posts and to recruit agency staff at the present moment, however, best efforts to do so were continuing. This situation was not unique to Middlesbrough.

The findings and evaluation of progress in relation to Early Help were as follows:-

Positives included:-

- Audits demonstrated the majority of practice was rated as good.
- Interventions were preventing risks escalating and reducing the need for statutory intervention and families' circumstances were improving.
- Managers had robust oversight of work (through auditing and performance data).
- Prompt 'step-up' and 'step-down' were aligned with children's needs.
- Additional teams and team managers had been created and recruitment was ongoing.
- In the sample seen, assessments were thorough and completed with families.
- 'My Family Plans' included family goals and were a shared plan for families to actively engage in.

Some of the areas needing focus within Early Help included:-

- High caseloads impacted on practitioners' capacity for intensive work. (Recruitment for additional staff had commenced).
- For some children, actions in the My Family Plan did not address all the presenting risks. (This issue was addressed whilst inspectors were on site to their satisfaction).

Inspection of the MACH identified the following positives:-

- Audits demonstrated that the majority of practice was rated as good.
- Increased partner presence and Social Worker management posts to ensure capacity for increased remit and responsibilities.
- Work with partner agencies to improve the quality of contacts and referrals - well co-ordinated response for children in line with their needs.
- Triage ensured timely responses to Police contacts.
- Managers made appropriate and timely decisions and oversight.
- Concerns were RAG rated ensuring safeguarding was in line with initial risk rating.
- Screenings of contacts and referrals – comprehensive included past history and contact with parents.
- Strategy meetings were held promptly and improved partnership presence assisted information sharing. The meetings provided appropriate decision making and children had a plan in place to protect them from escalating harm.

Inspectors identified the following positives within the Assessment Service:-

- Child Protection enquiries and Child in Need assessments were thorough and mostly completed in timescales
- The voice of the child was consistently clear and parents were consulted.
- Analysis of risk and need were clear and led to appropriate next steps.
- Legacy of poor practice resulted in some children being referred back to the Service as their sustained needs had not been met. A monthly Panel to look at re-referrals had been introduced to address this.
- Consent withdrawn on transfer from one service to another – strengthened senior manager oversight of decisions to close due to lack of consent.

The areas needing focus were as follows:-

- 25% of audits were inadequate.
- In the last three months, challenges in managing demand and throughput due to increased volume of demand and complexity of children's circumstances were causing additional workload pressures and higher caseloads.
- Some gaps in case recording and case records not finalised leading to children's records being incomplete. Could lead to delay in identifying and responding to children's needs.
- Social Workers had left the service before finishing assessments and reallocating work had led to delay.
- Workforce issues remained a challenge and had contributed to difficulties in the assessment service. Significant number of agency staff and teams, however, a substantial workforce development offer was in place.

The Panel was informed that the next Monitoring Visit would take place in November and would focus on Care Experienced Young People. The Ofsted Annual Engagement Conversation, across Children's Services, was set to take place in December. It was anticipated that the next full judgement inspection was likely to take place in February 2023.

The Executive Director wished to place on record her thanks to all staff across the service, and to Members, for their dedication to evidencing that 'Middlesbrough Children Matter'.

A discussion ensued and the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel Member praised the staff within Children's Services and acknowledged that whilst there were still some big challenges to overcome, there had been significant improvement across the service to improve the lives of children in Middlesbrough.
- The Director of Children's Care referred to the challenges with workforce stability and considered it to be an issue across the whole of the social care sector. Colleagues within the Tees Valley were experiencing similar challenges. In the context of Middlesbrough, the

challenge to retain and recruit staff was exacerbated by having the highest demand for children's social care in the country, the extreme challenges facing some of Middlesbrough's families, and an increase in the complexity of cases. Social Workers continued to work hard to meet demand.

- The Panel was advised that in terms of the number of referrals received by the MACH, or front door, August was traditionally a quieter time, however, during August 2022 around 1,340 contacts came into the service, and around 500 families per month requiring an assessment from the Assessment Service. This evidenced the high levels of demand in the town.

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

AGREED that the update information in relation to the most recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit, for July 2022, 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 at its meetings on 21 September 2022, namely:-

- Mayor in attendance – to provide details of his work and portfolio.
- Executive Forward Work Programme.
- Corporate Performance Update – Quarter one 2022/23.
- Revenue & Capital Budget - Projected Outturn at Quarter one 2022/23.
- Scrutiny Chairs' Updates.
- Next OSB meeting: Tuesday, 25 October at 10am.

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 to take place on Monday, 24 October 2022 at 10.30am, Mandela Room, Town Hall.