

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 9 November 2020.

PRESENT: Councillor Garvey (Chair), Councillor Dodds (Vice Chair); Councillors: Cooke, Cooper (substitute for Councillor Saunders), Hill, Uddin, J Walker and Wilson.

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

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

An **APOLOGY** for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor Saunders.

**** 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 12 October 2020 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

**** SUSPENSION OF COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE NO. 5 - ORDER OF BUSINESS**

AGREED: In accordance with Council Procedure Rule No. 5, the Scrutiny Panel agreed to vary the order of business to consider the agenda items in the following order: 5, 6, 4.

UPDATE – OFSTED MONITORING VISIT TO THE MIDDLESBROUGH MULTI-AGENCY CHILDREN'S HUB (MACH)

S Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services, and R Farnham, Director of Children's Care, were in attendance at the meeting to provide the Panel with an update on the recent Ofsted monitoring visit to the Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH).

The Panel was advised that two Ofsted Inspectors had carried out a 'virtual' monitoring visit over a two-day period on 23-24 September 2020.

During the monitoring visit, the inspectors focussed on progress made by the MACH, the 'front door' of Children's Services, particularly:-

- The quality and screening of referrals.
- The identification of, and response to, risk.
- The understanding by partner agencies of threshold decisions for social work support.
- The quality of initial assessment and planning.

A significant amount of evidence was provided before and during the visit and Inspectors held case discussions with frontline staff and held interviews with Members and Officers involved in the improvement programme.

The findings of the visit were provided immediately at the end of the second day and summarised in a subsequent letter, dated 16 October 2020. The letter would not be published on the Ofsted website, however, a copy had been circulated to all Members and partners.

In summary, the overall findings stated that the Local Authority had made some progress in the following areas:-

- Social Work practice in the 'front door' of the Service.
- The immediate response to 16-17 year old homeless young people.
- Performance monitoring including a new quality assurance framework.
- Improving strategic oversight of services for children and young people.

The Executive Director stated that Leaders acknowledged that there was still significant work to do in improving the quality of practice for children and young people in other areas of the Service.

In terms of leadership, the Panel was advised that the Inspectors found:-

- Continuing commitment from the Chief Executive and Lead Member.
- Determination and vision for improving the quality of interventions making a difference for children and families.
- Senior leaders had a realistic understanding of the endemic weakness in practice informing an appropriately focussed Improvement Plan.

In terms of the MACH, Inspectors found:-

- Substantially improved practice in the quality of referrals, screening, decision-making and management oversight.
- An exponential increase in demand due to a necessary change in the application of thresholds for service and a lack of throughput for children's cases.
- Most contacts by partner agencies were converted to referrals for a social work service, demonstrating an improved understanding of thresholds by referring agencies.

In relation to the Assessment Teams, the Inspectors found:-

- The quality of some children's assessments had improved but most were not completed within a timeframe that supported the child's identified needs.
- Risk was better understood.
- The child's voice was heard through direct work, however, children's voices and their lived experience was not consistently seen in all casework.
- Children's diversity needs and identity were narrowly understood.
- There had been a rigorous approach to safety planning for children during the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular a multi-agency approach to children living with domestic abuse during lockdown.

In brief, the visit had found substantial improvement in the MACH, referral screening and decision making and management oversight.

In terms of improvement, the visit found that high caseloads were having a demonstrative impact on the quality of social work practice for children's cases, the timescales of work completed, management oversight and the ability to embed learning from audits and training to social workers.

The Panel was informed that there would be a visit from the Commissioner for a three-day period between 9-11 November and that he would subsequently report on progress to the Minister for Education. There would be an annual conversation with Ofsted on 9 December and between now and 31 March 2021 there would be a three-day wider focussed visit across the Service. The next visit and report by the Commissioner would take place in May 2021.

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

- In response to a query, the Executive Director responded that the key areas for improvement were around the workforce and a Workforce Strategy was under development. This would

cover recruitment, retention and the offer to Social Workers in terms of overall development and the Centre for Practice Excellence. Permanence also needed to be a priority to ensure that children were moving to their forever homes as quickly as possible. At the present time focus needed to be on how the workforce and its work was managed through Covid and beyond. It was also highlighted that the recent monitoring visit had focussed on the MACH and that Social Work practice also needed to be improved in the areas of Child Protection, Child in Need and Children Looked After.

- A Panel Member asked about the increase in caseloads due to revised thresholds and it was explained that the threshold of need had previously been set too high and as a consequence, thresholds had been reduced. This meant that more work was entering the social work system, hence the reason for the increase in caseloads. The Director of Children's Care stated that there had been around a 36% increase in the number of assessments undertaken within the MACH and a large percentage of those children had gone on to require a plan either as a Child in Need, Child Protection or going on to becoming looked after.
- It was recognised that 36% was a big increase and it was queried what impact this had on children waiting to be assessed and also the financial impact on the local authority. The Panel was advised that caseloads were high which was slowing the Service's capacity to improve. Some managed teams had been brought in, particularly during Covid, within the Referral and Assessment Service and Safeguarding and Care Planning Service. The Third Innovate Team was recommissioned to look at care placements. In terms of allocating children awaiting assessment, the most vulnerable children who needed to be assessed were allocated first. There was a time period of 45 days in which to undertake an assessment and this was taking longer at the moment. The impact of this was that it then took longer for a child's plan to be put in place and longer for the child's needs to be met. A pro-active approach was being taken to carefully consider where the Service could finance bringing in Social Workers to make the biggest difference.
- The Director of Children's Care added that in terms of decision-making around children in relation to what needed to happen next for the child, October's performance data showed that 90% of decisions were made within 24 hours and 100% of decisions were made within 48 hours. It was hoped that the Panel would feel reassured that this part of the process did happen quickly.
- A Panel Member asked whether, due to high caseloads, the Service was continuing to attempt to recruit additional Social Workers. The Executive Director responded that there were some existing agency vacancies which had not been responded to. There were currently three vacancies within the Children Looked After Teams, however, difficulties in recruiting Social Workers was a national issue. Plans for a recruitment campaign were underway which would include the development of a 'micro site' with a foreword from the Executive Director, Chief Executive and Lead Member for Children's Social Care in relation to Middlesbrough's exciting improvement journey and becoming part of the team. It was added that bringing in managed teams, such as Innovate ensured good social work practice and increased capacity.
- Reference was made to one of the findings from the recent visit "... that children's identity and diversity needs were narrowly understood" and it was queried whether this could be elaborated upon. The Director explained that the service understood the needs of children in terms of religion and ethnicity, however, the broader identity of the child needed to be better understood, for example, what it was like for a nine-year-old boy growing up in Middlesbrough. In terms of improving this, it was highlighted that this would become part of the training and development around awareness and education that was being embedded within Children's Services.
- Reference was made to the finding in relation to 16-17 year old homeless young people and it was queried whether they were young people already known to Children's Services. In response it was explained that they were referring to young people who presented to the

Service as homeless and Children's Services needed to discuss the option of becoming looked after with them. This previously was not being done properly to offer them safety and security.

- In response to a query as to how many staff made up the Leaving Care (Pathways) Team, it was stated that additional resources had been put into the Team since the last Ofsted inspection. The Team consisted of Social Workers and Personal Advisors, a CAMHS Worker and Health Worker led by a Team Manager and two Assistant Team Managers.
- It was queried what the current position was with regard to sick leave within the teams and the reasons for sickness absence. The Panel was advised that regular reports had to be submitted to the DfE regarding the availability of Social Workers, including sickness absence and those within households that were self-isolating. Absence levels had decreased recently.
- Reference was made to guaranteeing interviews for young people in care/care leavers and it was queried whether this scheme was still operated by the Job Centre. The Director informed that she would need to double check this in terms of the Job Centre initiative, however, Work Readiness Practitioners within the Work Readiness Team worked specifically with young people to help them into employment, education and training and this included working with young people in care/care leavers.
- A Member of the Panel suggested that that the Lead Member for Children's Social Care could meet with relevant directors and managers with a view to prioritising available jobs or training opportunities within the Council to Middlesbrough's Children Looked After, providing they met the criteria. For example, seasonal work within Environment Services. The Executive Director advised that she would be discussing that particular issue with the Director of Environment. The Lead Member for Children's Social Care commented that Middlesbrough's Children Looked After were our young people and that it was important to help them into a working environment and he would champion those young people. It was acknowledged that access points for young people into employment created confusion and that the Council was looking at introducing transition workers to work throughout the town to help young people make decisions from leaving school into work. This would be a step in the right direction.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

SUFFICIENCY & PERMANENCY (PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN CARE) – DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE

Proposed Draft Terms of Reference for the current review topic of 'Sufficiency and Permanency (Perceptions of Children in Care)' were shared with the Panel at the meeting for consideration and comment.

During discussion, it was suggested that Term of Reference 1) be amended to include placement types.

The Democratic Services Officer agreed to make the amendment and to circulate to the Panel following the meeting, for further comment.

The proposed Terms of Reference were as follows:-

1. To examine the numbers and profile of Middlesbrough's Children Looked After population and placement types and how we compare both nationally and to statistical neighbours.
2. 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.

3. To investigate the issues around permanency, including adoption, and to examine any initiatives and areas of best practice.
4. 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.

AGREED as follows:-

1. That the suggested amendment be made to the proposed Terms of Reference and that they be circulated to Panel Members for final comment.
2. That the Chair be given authority to finalise and approve the Terms of Reference, as set out above, once all comments had been received.

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

P Jemson, Head of Children Looked After and Corporate Parenting, and P Rudd, Head of Futures for Families and Residential Care Service Manager, were welcomed to the meeting. They had been invited to attend alongside the Executive Director and Director of Children's Care to provide the Panel with information in relation to placement stability and placement breakdowns. This followed on from the profile of Middlesbrough's Children Looked After provided at the Panel's previous meeting.

In terms of placement type and provision, it was reported that 73% of Children Looked After in Middlesbrough lived in a foster placement, this included connected persons (kinship care) placements. This had increased from 69% the previous year. The presentation included a table highlighting the placement types. There were currently 343 placements (52%) with in-house carers. This had increased from 42% the previous year and 125 private placements.

The Panel was informed that recently published data showed that 51% of Middlesbrough children were placed outside of the town, however, to provide context, from October 2020 only 18% of Middlesbrough children were currently placed more than 20 miles away from Middlesbrough, meaning that 82% of children were placed within 20 miles of Middlesbrough.

In relation to placement stability, this was higher than the national average and statistical neighbours and it was highlighted that 64% (123) of children that had been looked after for two and a half years or more had remained in the same placement for two or more years. Whilst placement moves were sometimes due to a placement breaking down, there were positive reasons for a placement move such as a child being moved to an adoptive placement.

Within the last 12 months: 469 of Middlesbrough's Children Looked After were in their first and only placement; 147 children had experienced two placement moves; 49 had three placements; seven children had four placements; eight children had five placements; three children had six placements and no children had seven or more.

There had been a slight decrease in the number of Children Looked After and, as of today, there were a total of 680 (a reduction of nine since the Panel's previous meeting).

The Panel was provided with data on placement breakdowns from the period April to October 2020 and the placement type. In October, two in-house foster placements had broken down and two independent (external) foster placements had broken down. There had been two external residential placements breakdowns during November. It was noted that there had been only one connected persons placement breakdown during the period April to October.

The Panel was informed that work to prevent placement breakdowns and improve placement

stability included:-

- Corporate Parenting Strategy
- Innovate Social Work Team
- Futures for Families
- LCS transformation to support improved Social Work practice and performance reporting
- Returning children to placements in Middlesbrough
- Data analysis – understanding the reasons why placements have ended
- Introduction of placement disruption procedure
- Support offer to fragile placements

The Chair commented that he was keen for all Elected Members to be provided with a copy of the Corporate Parenting Strategy once it had been finalised. The Chair was particularly keen to promote engagement with all Members in relation to the Strategy and on their role as corporate parents. The Chair of Corporate Parenting Board, who was present at the meeting, advised that the consultation period on the document had ended on 31 October and suggested that an all Member briefing be arranged in order for feedback on the Strategy to be shared.

A discussion ensued and the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel Member considered one important aspect of stability for Children Looked After to be education and it was queried whether there was any available data on how many children placed outside of Middlesbrough continued to attend the same school. The Director of Children's Care responded that very detailed information was held by the Virtual School and this could be provided to the Panel. Wherever possible and practical, attempts were always made to avoid changing schools to maintain consistency.
- A Panel Member noted that in October two IFA and two in-house placement breakdowns had occurred and it was queried how long the children had been in those placements prior to the breakdown. The Head of Children Looked After and Corporate Parenting advised that she would obtain the information for Members. In terms of what happened when a placement did breakdown, a process was currently being embedded with Social Workers where fragile placements were being looked at. This work was being closely carried out with the Futures for Families Team who offered intensive support to placements to try and stabilise them. Monthly Care Team meetings, with senior management oversight, were also being embedded allowing them to identify when placements were becoming unstable in order to provide additional early support to stop the placement deteriorating further. This involved collaborative working between Futures for Families, Residential and Fostering Service, Commissioning Service and the Children Looked After Teams to ensure that Independent Fostering Agencies, Futures for Families and in-house fostering were able to provide wrap around support to children in unstable placements. This was a comprehensive support package and could include respite and outreach support for children and carers.
- A Member made reference to the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel which was looking at school exclusions and expressed concern that one particular school had a high rate of fixed term exclusions and that 90% of those exclusions were Children Looked After. It was queried whether this was being looked into. The Head of Children Looked After and Corporate Parenting advised that communication and links with the Virtual School were being strengthened and included monthly meetings with the Head of the Virtual School to review children with low attendance and those at risk of exclusion to ensure appropriate plans were in place to improve attendance and avoid exclusion. The Executive Director shared the concerns and assured Members that the issue would be carefully looked at and that it was already under scrutiny by the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel.
- A Panel Member sought clarification in relation to the data showing five young people recorded as living in independent living places. The Director of Children's Care confirmed that these placements were Supported Lodgings Placements. Providers were similar to foster carers and

were assessed by the Service as to whether they were suitable to provide such a placement and had the necessary skills to support the young person. The placements were a move on placement from fostering before stepping into full independence.

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

AGREED as follows:-

1. That the information provided be noted and considered in the context of the Panel's current scrutiny topic.
2. That further details be provided to a future Panel meeting in relation to Futures for Families and the Innovate Team.

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 5 November 2020, namely:-

- Executive forward work programme.
- Middlesbrough Council Covid-19 Response – Chief Exec & Dir of Public Health.
- Executive Member update – Deputy Mayor and Lead Member for Children's Social Care (Councillor High)
- OSB Membership
- Final Report – Adult Social Care & Services Scrutiny Panel – Physical Activity for older people (65+)
- Final Report – Children & Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel – Addressing Poverty Issues and the impact on learning.
- Final Report – Economic Development, Environment & Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel – Teesside Crematorium
- Scrutiny Panel 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, 7 December 2020 at 4.00pm.