

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY PANEL**

A meeting of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel was held on Wednesday, 19 July 2023.

**PRESENT:** Councillors E Clynch (Chair), L Hurst, D Jackson, J Kabuye, S Platt and J Walker.

**OFFICERS:** R Brown, C Lunn and K Simmons.

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:** Councillors S Hill and M Nugent.

23/1 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

<b>Name of Member</b>	<b>Type of Interest</b>	<b>Item/Nature of Interest</b>
Councillor D Jackson	Non-Pecuniary	Chair – Park End Primary School.
Councillor J Kabuye	Non-Pecuniary	Governor – Sacred Heart Primary School.

23/2 **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY PANELS – FOR INFORMATION**

Members were advised that at a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 18 April 2023, a new structure for scrutiny arrangements in Middlesbrough had been agreed. As a consequence, the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel was a new panel for this year.

The minutes of the last meetings of the two former Children's Services scrutiny panels were provided for Members' information, as follows:

- Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel - 20 March 2023; and
- Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel - 14 March 2023.

**NOTED**

23/3 **OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

The Director of Education and Partnerships and the Interim Head of Review and Development Unit, Quality and Assessment and Principal Social Worker were in attendance to provide the panel with an overview of the services provided across the Directorate, and to also highlight the strategic and departmental priorities for the coming year.

The Director of Education and Partnerships provided information regarding the four areas within his remit, which regulated the education sector in Middlesbrough. These were delivered as follows:

- Achievement.
- Inclusion and Additional Needs.
- Access to Education.
- Partnerships.

Members were informed that the Achievement area comprised of several teams/services, as follows:

- Family Hubs (previously Sure Start) and Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).
- Ethnic Minority Achievement Team (EMAT) and English as an Additional Language (EAL).
- Safeguarding and Compliance, which dealt with concerns about families and referrals to services.
- Achievement Hubs, which worked with schools to increase achievement. Members heard that Middlesbrough had an almost fully academized system, with direct

reporting to the Department for Education (DfE). The authority held accountability for 30,000 children and their achievement. Work included undertaking inductions with new international arrivals and driving standards across all Trusts in Middlesbrough. The current focus was around attendance, numeracy and literacy, with £1.7m of DfE funding invested in this. It was explained that the vast majority of education money in Middlesbrough came from the DfE, with a £170m pot paying for teachers, utilities, etc. - a £40m allocation remained for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) services.

- Literacy/National Literacy Trust (NLT).

In terms of Inclusion and Additional Needs, the teams/services involved in this work were:

- Education Psychologist Service (EPS). A brief overview of this service was provided, with reference being made to EP statements (previously SEND statements); the support provided by school staff; and work with other Local Authorities, such as Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council, for income generation.
- Sensory Teaching and Advisory Service, which ran across all five Tees Local Authorities and related to a child's audio/visual requirements.
- Inclusion Assessment and Review 0-25 Service.
- Resources and Local Offer.

Access to Education comprised the following teams/services:

- Strategic School Planning, i.e., looking at provision and determining whether Middlesbrough had both a sufficient number of schools and the appropriate types. Reference was made to special schools and the high numbers of children on roll. It was explained that since the pandemic, owing to young children not acquiring tertiary skills, the number of children with additional needs had increased dramatically. A plan for the development of a further school had been developed; reference was made to a special school that had recently been completed on Ladgate Lane. Details regarding a temporary teaching facility in Middlesbrough were also provided to the panel. A further matter for the Place Planning Team related to population changes and working with international families to place children in local schools.
- Virtual School, i.e., managing the coordination of individuals in the system. It was explained that the Virtual School discharged responsibility on the schools' behalf, monitoring and following up on progress.
- Admissions.
- Education Welfare Service Team and Elective Home Education (EHE).
- Children Missing from Education (CME), i.e., tracking children to ensure that they were where they ought to have been, and the management of People Missing Out On Education (PMOOE) (e.g. a disruptive child not receiving their 25 hour education entitlement).

Regarding Partnerships, teams/services involved in this work were:

- Youth Justice (YJ) (previously Youth Offending Service (YOS)) - Middlesbrough and Redcar. Reference was made to Vulnerable, Exploited, Missing, Trafficked (VEMT), which looked at exploited children and the impact of serious and organised crime in Middlesbrough, and measures for counteracting this.
- Risk Reduction.
- South Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership (STSCP), which looked at learning from safeguarding (e.g. guidance and training achieved following the investigation of a child death in the area), and Children's Trust, which offered a forward thinking approach to look at the impact of child poverty in Middlesbrough in comparison to other areas and identifying new ways to tackle child poverty.

In terms of the strategic and departmental priorities for the coming year, a number of these were highlighted to the panel.

In terms of challenges, these were noted as follows:

- Increasing permanent exclusions.
- Increasing Education Health and Care Plans, which had resulted in

departmental/budget overspends. A bid for £1m of DfE funding had been placed to upskill mainstream schools with the aim of preventing children from immediately being sent to special schools.

- Falling school roll contrasted with increasing pressure in some parts of town.
- Low school readiness. It was explained that Middlesbrough's more vulnerable children 'fell off' during the transition into secondary schools and this needed to be challenged. It was highlighted that wider determinants acted upon children and was not about the quality of education in Middlesbrough.
- Low attendance.

In terms of innovation and transformation, these were identified as follows:

- Inclusion model, i.e., keeping children in mainstream school and ensuring the appropriateness of facilities offered to them.
- SEND reform.
- Place planning.
- Family Hubs.
- Attendance project/White Paper.
- Turnaround/Instant Justice. The panel was informed of funding that had been received to deliver the Instant Justice initiative. Reference was made to Anti-Social Behaviour and work taking place to prevent this before children committed crime.

The Interim Head of Review and Development Unit, Quality and Assessment, and Principal Social Worker provided information regarding Children's Care.

Members heard that the service currently comprised six areas, as follows:

- Early Help and Prevention, which provided help and support to families sooner with the aim of preventing children from entering care.
- Multi-Agency Childrens Hub (MACH), Assessment and Emergency Duty Team (EDT) Link.
- Safeguarding and Care Planning and Children with Disabilities.
- Review and Development Unit, Quality and Assurance and principal Social Work.
- Residential, Supported Accommodation, Resource and Care Leavers.
- Fostering and Children Looked After (CLA).

It was explained that the service provided a range of statutory Children's Care and Early Help support, which included:

- Providing a range of preventative interventions for children and their families from pre-birth to 19 years.
- Supporting children and young people from 0-18 under Child in Need Plans, including Middlesbrough's disabled children.
- Safeguarding children and young people 0-18 under statutory frameworks.
- Offering an Edge of Care Service via a team of 24/7 Family Resource Workers.
- A Multi-Agency Exploitation Hub to support young people and families impacted by Sexual and Criminal Exploitation.
- Commissioning additional resources for those children and families being supported, including therapeutic intervention.
- Caring for and acting as Corporate Parents to Middlesbrough's most vulnerable Looked After Children and young people.
- Supporting Middlesbrough's care leavers through transition, to independence.
- Working collaboratively with Education, Health, Public Health, Police, Adult Services, Housing and Voluntary Sector partners.

In terms of impact, details were provided as follows:

- External impact: Improved outcomes for children, young people and families; Preventative Intervention reduced the need for statutory services; Safeguarding and supporting children, young people and care leavers up to the age of 25; and Apprenticeship and employment opportunities for the community.
- Internal impact: Sufficiency of placements and workforce; Savings assurances within 2023/24 budget; and Collaboration with wider Council directorates.

The key issues for the department, which were national issues and not unique to Middlesbrough, were outlined to Members as follows:

- Internal placement sufficiency.
- Recruitment and retention of permanent workforce.
- Continued recruitment and retention of in-house foster carers.
- Providing services to children and families within the financial savings plan.
- Continued focus on practice improvement (post Ofsted full inspection) to include:
  - Development and implementation of a 'Neglect Strategy' to tackle issues associated with poverty and deprivation (Domestic Abuse; Substance and Alcohol Misuse; Mental Health; and Neglect).
  - An improved offer to Middlesbrough's Care Leavers.
  - Embed Exploitation Hub.
  - Multi-Disciplinary and Multi-Agency Pre-Birth Team.
  - Further strengthen partnerships and collaboration.

Regarding priorities, the panel was appraised of the key challenges and opportunities currently being presented, as follows:

- Challenges: Delivering services within limited budget; Recruiting and retaining staff; Fragile improvements that needed embedding; High levels of child poverty and neglect; and OFSTED returning in September 2023 to inspect progress made.
- Innovation and Transformation: Exploitation hub; Expansion of children's homes; Recruitment and retention of Foster Carers; Family Hubs; Locality teams; and Expansion of the academy.

In terms of the recruitment and retention of Foster Carers, it was highlighted that the market had been very challenging. Reference was made to the competition that had been experienced from both independent agencies and other Local Authorities. There had, however, been an increase in the number of Foster Carers, as well as in the number of children's homes (of which there were currently six within Middlesbrough).

A Member made reference to the OFSTED inspection and queried the current position. In response, the panel heard that following the previous inspection, further visits by the Department for Education (DfE) and OFSTED would be taking place in September and October 2023 respectively. It was explained that the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) had resulted in an overall inadequate rating, but results in areas such as Youth Justice had been good. It was pointed out that results were representative of a particular point in time. Children's homes were inspected every six months.

A Member raised a query regarding staff recruitment and referenced the high number of interim staff currently employed by the Council and by schools. In response, Members were informed of the national difficulties in recruiting to sectors such as teaching, particularly in subjects such as science, and to permanent opportunities in Social Work and Social Care. Consideration was given to the pros and cons of permanent versus agency contracts, which included reference to such matters as workplace culture, salaries, working conditions and caseloads. It was indicated that a workforce plan, which could potentially be looked at by scrutiny, had been drafted to recruit permanent staff. Mention was made of a good conversion rate that had recently been achieved in terms of agency staff becoming permanent employees. There was strong competition across the region to attract potential employees; reference was made to initiatives such as 'golden handshakes'. Challenge from the private sector/agencies was apparent, but also from other Local Authorities in terms of outbidding on salaries. Work had taken place in the region to establish a salary cap and adherence to this was monitored. Consideration was given to the impact of the pandemic on workforce recruitment and retention; it was indicated that contact between Social Workers and their colleagues, to whom they relied upon for information and support, had been heavily restricted. It was felt that this had had significant impact on an already fragile workforce and had caused some employees to either move to agency work or leave the profession entirely.

A short discussion ensued in relation to places for children; Fosters Carers and children's homes. The panel heard that there was a capacity issue for Foster Carers nationally; difficulties had recently been experienced when services had attempted to find a late placement for a child. Fostering was competitive and posed a significant issue for Local Authorities because a number of private agencies were investment funded. There had been a shift in the market, with a number of large providers taking over smaller providers. Services also needed to be made available to move children out of area when required.

In response to an enquiry regarding preventative intervention, the need for statutory services and the involvement of local communities, Members were informed that every Family Hub had a panel of professionals and local residents to steer it. The third sector was represented and activities also captured the voice of the child. It was indicated that Middlesbrough's communities changed rapidly and services did not always maintain pace with that, with more transience being seen in the Town Centre than in suburban areas; the example of international students studying at Teesside University was provided. It was felt that increased community intelligence would help benefit this. Consideration was given to the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and how well this accurately described the town.

A Member queried the main difficulties in tackling school attendance issues. In response, the panel heard that attendance issues started in primary, but became more obvious at the secondary school level. It was indicated that increased resource was available at primary level to look into this. Attendance had the most acute impact with vulnerable children: Looked After Children tended to have excellent attendance, whereas the weakest attendees tended to be the child protection cohort: joint working between police, social work and other professionals was needed in this regard. Local Authorities should have had attendance teams, and academies attendance officers, in place. It was the responsibility of individual schools to employ to these positions because academies held their own budgets, however, these roles were often the first to be deleted when budget constraints were faced. Middlesbrough was currently around three or four percentage points behind the rest of the North East region. It was highlighted that an additional £300,000 had been invested in addressing attendance performance this year. Members were informed of a pilot scheme that Middlesbrough had been chosen to participate in with Barnados, which had ran for four months and only just finished. An immediate result would not be seen, but the project had offered a very positive opportunity.

A short discussion ensued in relation to the potential sharing of services/resources with neighbouring Local Authorities. It was felt that this was possible to a degree, but success would depend on the issues being experienced by those Local Authorities involved.

A Member queried the strength of the relationship with Teesside University. In response, Members were informed that a very strong relationship existed, particularly in relation to recruitment. The University was very keen to work with the Council and vice-versa. Consideration was given to the transience of the Social Work profession, which was more active than other professions (such as teaching). Social Work was teams based - and those teams were not tied to Middlesbrough. A number of staff were currently completing apprenticeships and further development work opportunities were currently being devised. It was intended that more adult learning opportunities would become available, which would both upskill staff and encourage them to remain in Middlesbrough. With regards to international students and their children, it was explained that Children's Services wanted to be proactive in supporting families by holding pre-departure meetings, and providing information around schooling and other matters.

The panel considered school financial matters and the issues around allowing schools to continue to operate if they could not afford to do so. Consideration was given to such factors as 'parachute money' and specialist provision. Academies were responsible for the day-to-day running of schools, but Middlesbrough Council had a duty to ensure the right outcomes for students.

In response to a query regarding the placement of children in homes both within Middlesbrough and outside of the area, the panel was informed that options were currently being looked at to expand the number of children homes locally, of which there were currently six. There was a preference to place children with their own family members wherever possible. Pressure in high needs areas, such as agency costs and out of area placements, did require significant resource. It was indicated that there were plans to convert a further five

properties into children's homes, but taking into account purchasing, planning and conversion works, this would take time. It was hoped that all properties would be purchased and consented by April 2024, though the projected timeline was subject to change depending upon external factors.

In terms of back-to-school places, Members were informed of the Council's legal duty to meet sufficiency. Details regarding the permanent site at the Riverside, together with the temporary site near to the Crown Court were provided. It was indicated that a further site was required for overspill. There was increased capacity/space in more rural areas, but it was a case of whether parents were able or willing to travel, and whether an increase in resource in the Town Centre was a more viable option. If land permitted, expansion of existing schools was more cost effective than building new schools, but there were strict rules on developing land that surrounded school buildings.

In response to a query regarding procedures for permanent exclusions, Members heard that a panel hearing to determine each individual case would be arranged. There was an intervention policy/triage process in place, which involved discussion of the child involved and a respective package of appropriate support. Professional partners involved in this process included Local Authority and police staff. Following the sixth day, the Local Authority was responsible for the child's education through the Ethnic Minority Achievement Team (EMAT). It was highlighted that a significant amount of work had been undertaken to prevent exclusions from occurring.

A Member made reference to Instance Justice and queried whether this was connected to the Cleveland Police and Crime Commissioner. In response, it was confirmed that it was, with activity being focused on low level offences.

A short discussion ensued in relation to Children's Services and budget constraints. The importance of having the appropriate level of resource to result in the desired outcomes was highlighted. However, ensuring value for money, efficiency and effectiveness was key.

The Chair thanked the Director of Education and Partnerships and the Interim Head of Review and Development Unit, Quality and Assessment and Principal Social Worker for attending the meeting and providing the overview. The Democratic Services Officer outlined the next steps for Members to agree the Work Programme 2023/2024.

**AGREED** that the information provided was received and noted.

23/4

#### **PROPOSED SCHEDULE OF MEETING DATES FOR 2023/2024**

A proposed schedule of meeting dates for the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel for the 2023/2024 Municipal Year was submitted for Members' consideration.

**AGREED** that the proposed meeting dates for 2023/2024 were approved.