

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

A meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was held on Wednesday, 18 October 2023.

**PRESENT:** Councillors J Kabuye (Vice-Chair), J Banks, I Blades, S Dean, J Ewan, M McClintock and J Platt.

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:** G Lightfoot - Press  
Councillor Z Uddin - Executive Member for Children's Services.

**OFFICERS:** D Alaszewski, B Carr, C Lunn and J Tynan.

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:** Councillors E Clynch, M Storey and J Walker.

### DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received at this point in the meeting.

### MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD - 20 SEPTEMBER 2023

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 20 September 2023 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

### REVISED MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD - 26 JULY 2023

The revised minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 26 July 2023 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

### EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE - CHILDREN'S SERVICES

The Chair welcomed the Executive Member for Children's Services, the Executive Director of Children's Services and the Interim Director of Children's Care to the meeting and invited the Executive Member to deliver his presentation.

The Executive Member thanked Members for the opportunity to appear before the Board and began by outlining the service's policies and plans; Members were invited to ask questions throughout the presentation.

Members heard that the aim was to show Middlesbrough's children that they mattered by working to make the town safe and welcoming and improve outcomes for all children and young people. The Executive Member was working closely with Directors, Heads of Service, the Executive Member for Finance and Governance and all other relevant officers of the Council to help achieve this.

In terms of driving strategic priorities and Directorate priorities to improve outcomes for Middlesbrough's children and young people and their families, the Children's Services review was progressing well. Both the Executive Director of Children's Services and the Interim Director of Children's Care had recently been appointed.

Regarding the Children's Services Improvement Plan, work was currently progressing on the improvement journey. It was acknowledged that more needed to be done, but the hard work being undertaken by staff was noted.

Reference was made to the legislation that underpinned Children's Services; the Children Act 1989 and Children Act 2004 were highlighted.

Referring to the work of the virtual schools, the Executive Member explained that this was an online education platform that tracked and supported the progress of the children and young people that the authority cared for. The Executive Member commended the work of those involved in the service.

Regarding Early Help and the Multi Agency Children's Hub (MACH), Members were informed that Early Help was also known as First Contact in Social Care. The importance of addressing issues in a timely and effective manner to prevent significant impact later on was highlighted. The MACH was a triage service that acted as the first point of contact to assess the most appropriate support service, based on individual need and risk, and signpost accordingly.

Referring to work with the Safeguarding Children's Board, it was explained that joint work to support children in protection/care was carried out with other Local Authorities.

Children Looked After (CLA) referred to all children in the care system, irrespective of type of care, i.e., residential care, foster care, etc. If the MACH determined the requirement for support, this would be provided. It was indicated that, at present, 70 young children were externally placed. Not only was this expensive, but external placements were not always the most appropriate as it increased distance between home and friends. It was recognised that some children may have benefitted from out of area placement, but not all. From a practitioners' perspective, the preferred approach was to consider the return of children back to the local area.

A Member queried how many children in total, to include all placement types, were currently under the authority's care. In response, it was indicated that there were around 500. The Member noted Middlesbrough's current overall population being circa. 110,000, of which 500 were children in care.

A Member made reference to the Children's Service budget and queried whether an overspend was expected this financial year. In response, the Executive Director of Children's Services advised that this would be looked into, and information provided in due course.

In response to a query regarding the purchase and renovation of residential properties to accommodate children, the Executive Member advised that the Council would have seven residential homes once two properties currently being acquired/developed had been completed. Reference was also made to Gleneagles Resource Centre for Children with Disabilities, which was currently being extended. Some of the children residing in the homes had complex needs, others were housed for reasons that prevented stays at the family home. Practitioners were hoping to have as many children as possible returned to the area, initially 21. In terms of financials, a Member commented that £56m had been spent last year, most of this on external services. It was also commented that the average spend per child was £5600 per week. In response, the Interim Director of Children's Care acknowledged the points made and explained that officers were looking to re-evaluate services and determine appropriate improvement action for both the Council's finances and children's experiences. A Member commented that some of the properties being looked at for development were already owned by the Council, and that operations would be funded through saved money, i.e., the weekly fees of £5600 per child would not be payable. It was felt that this would offer both improved care for children and a means of self-sufficiency for the Council.

A Member referred to the 70 children currently externally placed and queried how many, on average, would be placed in a home. In response, the officers informed Members that this varied as it was based on the individual child's needs; sometimes between two and four children were placed together. Work was currently taking place to review youth provision. The challenge around placements was a national issue: there was no guarantee that children could be placed. In terms of financials, pre-pandemic there was a unit cost per home, but this was now very difficult to influence. All Local Authorities were trying to find solutions; developing Council-owned properties would assist in keeping children closer to families, though not all Local Authorities wished to pursue this. In terms of the number of properties being purchased, this would be based on the successful operation of the first few homes, before developing further properties and so on. It was indicated that having sufficient staff resource to operate homes could present challenge.

A Member commented that work on universal care needed to start when children were aged under five years, as it was felt to be difficult to change when of secondary age. The Member queried the activities being undertaken around early level intervention. In response, the Interim Director of Children's Care acknowledged that more work was needed around prevention and focus. Facilities such as Community Hubs were in place - it was now about

considering how resources could be linked together to prevent escalation for families. The Executive Director of Children's Services referred to the positive outcome of the external SEND inspection, which looked at youth provision and health, education and social care. The inspectors had reviewed early help and been complementary about it. The inspection had looked at children in need, disability support and provision by Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland Councils. Work was underway looking at the joined-up strategy and how this could be developed.

Regarding the recruitment of inhouse foster carers, it was explained that this work continued. There were only two families last year, but this had increased to 20 this year. More families were currently in the processing/assessment stage, which took around nine months, often longer, to complete. Independent fostering agencies did have some families available, but there was a preference to appoint inhouse carers.

In terms of exploring and increasing youth provision and purchasing community centres when central funds were available, it was explained that this was currently being looked into. Reference was made to the Council's current financial position and work that was taking place with organisations to see how the Council could link into those – through activity provision, for example.

Regarding the development of different types of Kinship Care packages, as appropriate, the Executive Member explained that Kinship Care referred to children being looked after by Connected Carers, i.e., extended family and friends, when they were not able to be cared for by parents. There were procedures in place, which included a 16-week assessment process and panel hearing. The Interim Director of Children's Care would ascertain the current number of Connected Carers and update the panel in due course. The Executive Member explained that the Council's website had recently been updated to reflect the increasing level of interest received.

Strengthening partnership working was a key objective, with work taking place between the Council and an array of partners in Health, Education, Police and Youth Justice.

Consideration was given to Equality and Diversity and addressing issues as appropriate. The Executive Member explained that this had been an area of focus within the recent OFSTED report, and a plan to improve practice was being developed. Middlesbrough was multicultural and it was important to work as effectively as possible for all residents.

The Executive Member detailed his priorities to the Board, as follows:

- Supporting Early Help and the MACH - thresholds and responses.
- Undertaking constructive dialogue with all agencies, which increased the referral intake.
- Consideration of the reduction of external residential placements and Independent Foster Placements (IFPs).
- Continuing to monitor and swap internal placements – it was explained that the number of places varied, and every child had different needs. Children needed to be (re)placed as appropriate.
- Purchasing of residential properties.
- Seeking funding where needed.
- Continuing to consult with Ward Councillors and residents – it was highlighted that all Councillors were corporate parents and, as such, important that all understood the role and what it encompassed.
- Recruiting inhouse Foster Carers.
- Continuing to improve internal workforce Team support.
- Extending parental support provision to all parents and carers to improve knowledge and experience.
- Supporting and protecting vulnerable children and young people in our society.
- Addressing Equality, Diversity, Sexuality, Age and Gender issues, where needed.
- Always building on strong working relationships and regular communication between staff members and service users.

A Member referred to the rise in foster carer numbers and queried whether an increase in fees could help raise this even further. In response, Members were advised that there were no plans at the moment to increase the fees; all Local Authorities paid different rates. It was

acknowledged that independent agencies paid higher rates than the Council, but this was due to available resources. It was indicated that some evaluation work would be undertaken to determine next steps for improving the offer for foster carers.

In response to a query regarding challenging poor practice, the Executive Member advised that activities would be reviewed. The need for continuity for the child was highlighted, together with examples of issues that had been raised, such as a lack of staff.

A Member reiterated the importance of consultation with Ward Councillors and sought assurance that this would be provided throughout the property development process. A second Member indicated that when children's homes were proposed, these plans were usually submitted to the Planning and Development Committee for approval. It was explained that, at these meetings, Ward Councillors were able to express their views. A third Member queried the number of children that would be placed in homes. In response, it was explained that numbers varied depending upon the needs of the children concerned. One property may have had one child, whereas another may have had six. A fourth Member compared these numbers to that of a general family unit and commented that these were likely to be around the same size. The Executive Member commented that it was a lengthy process placing children because it had to be suitable for their needs. Consideration was also given to staff resource and ensuring that this was available for the homes that the Council operated.

A Member explained that three years previously, Middlesbrough was third in the country for having the most children in care, after Blackpool and Hartlepool respectively, and queried the current position. In response, the Interim Director of Children's Care advised that this would be looked into, and a response provided in due course.

A Member referred to the 'threshold document' and raised some general points regarding Local Authorities having different thresholds/criteria. The Executive Director explained that this was subjective and that options would be assessed on an individual basis. Members were advised to contact the department with concerns about any children; the information would be reviewed, and an appropriate course of action determined.

In response to a comment from a Member regarding the 16-week assessment timeframe for Kinship Care, it was explained that this involved a viability assessment to review resources and other matters. Children were placed temporarily with families for the 16-week period; a multi-agency agreement would be put in place for the duration. Reference was made to consideration of special guardianship orders; it was noted that the number of private orders was increasing.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member for Children's Services, the Executive Director of Children's Services and the Interim Director of Children's Care for their attendance and contributions to the meeting.

**AGREED** that:

1. Regarding the queries raised in relation to Children's Services finance, the Executive Director of Children's Services would look into matters and provide a response via the Democratic Services Officer.
2. The current number of Connected Carers, together with the amount of cared for children, would be ascertained and provided to Members.
3. The information, as presented, be noted.

**MIDDLESBROUGH BOUNDARY REVIEW 2023 - FINAL DRAFT PROPOSAL**

The Democratic and Registration Manager presented the final draft of the Council's submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission.

It was explained that the submission had been amended in line with comments made by Members at the last Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting. The final draft submission had been considered by the Leadership Management Team, which did not make any amendments.

The final draft submission and associated documentation was forwarded to the Boundary Commission on 5 October 2023 for preliminary checking, to confirm that they had received all the necessary information. A response was currently awaited.

Members heard that prior to completing the Council size template, officers had reviewed the submissions of five other authorities' submissions that had been quoted as best practice by the Boundary Commission and had tried to model Middlesbrough's submission on those templates.

Since the report was circulated, additional amendments to the submission had been made. Officers had today been informed that Hemlington and Trimdon also had active community councils, and officers had also included reference to the two parish councils in the submission.

In terms of reporting on Phase Two, warding patterns would be submitted to a future meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board. The Commission would not look at warding patterns until a decision had been made on Council size.

In response to an enquiry from a Member, it was indicated that the deadline date for work was 31 October 2023. If any further issues were to arise an additional meeting would be arranged; however, it was felt that this would not be necessary.

A Member made reference to the term 'Council Size' and queried whether this could be changed to 'Councillor Number'. In response, it was explained that this was the Boundary Commission's wording and could not be changed.

Following brief discussion, Members agreed to the submission of the document to the Boundary Commission.

**AGREED** that:

1. The final draft of the Council's submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission be approved.
2. The information, as presented, be noted.

#### **REVISED REPORT - SETTING THE WORK PROGRAMME FOR OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD 2023/2024**

Following the previous submission to the Overview and Scrutiny Board on 20 September 2023, an updated version of the Work Programme report was submitted to include a previously omitted topic, i.e., Electoral Registration. Details were shown on page 54 of the agenda pack.

Members discussed both the already agreed Work Programme, i.e., the chosen topics of Homelessness and Cyber Security, together with the additional Electoral Registration topic. Reference was made to work being undertaken in other areas of the authority and consideration given as to how the scrutiny function could contribute to this work, without duplicating effort. The Board also gave thought to wider legislative timescales, particularly in relation to election planning, and the need to carefully align scrutiny work to these.

The Chair of the Health Scrutiny Panel indicated that information pertaining to Cyber Security had been provided at a recent meeting of that panel. As it was anticipated that more information relating to Cyber Security would be raised at future Health Scrutiny Panel meetings, it was suggested that this be relayed from those panel meetings to the Overview and Scrutiny Board. Members supported this approach.

Following discussion, it was agreed that the Board's first topic of investigation would be Homelessness, followed by Electoral Registration once that had been completed. Information relating to Cyber Security would be received via the Health Scrutiny Panel.

**AGREED** that:

1. The updated Work Programme be approved.
2. The information, as presented, be noted.

## **EXECUTIVE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chief Executive submitted a report which identified the forthcoming issues to be considered by the Executive, as outlined in Appendix A to the report. The report provided the Overview and Scrutiny Board with the opportunity to consider whether any item contained within the Executive Forward Work Programme should be considered by the Board or referred to a scrutiny panel.

A Member queried whether, in future, upcoming issues could be presented in decision date order, as opposed to A-Z of Executive Member title. It was agreed that this would be investigated.

**AGREED** that:

1. The Democratic Services Officer would review the formatting of the Forward Work Programme for the Overview and Scrutiny Board.
2. The information, as presented, be noted.

## **SCRUTINY CHAIRS UPDATE**

The Chair invited updates from individual Scrutiny Chairs. The following updates were provided:

### Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel

In the absence of the panel's Chair, the Democratic Services Officer provided an update. It was indicated that the panel intended to begin its first topic of investigation - School Attendance - at the next scheduled meeting on 30 October 2023.

### Health Scrutiny Panel

The Health Scrutiny Panel's next meeting was scheduled to take place on 23 October 2023. At this meeting, the Scrutiny Panel would continue to gather evidence in respect of its review of Dental Health and the Impact of Covid-19.

### Regeneration Scrutiny Panel

At the panel's last meeting held on 11 October 2023, Members received an overview from the Head of Planning. Amongst the information received, it was indicated that over 500 planning disputes were currently being dealt with by one member of staff, who was currently on part-time leave. The backlog was in excess of three years. Members had also discussed the Terms of Reference for their investigation. The next meeting was scheduled to take place on 1 December 2023. The Board discussed issues around staffing and the availability of Building Inspectors to undertake work.

As updates could not be provided for all scrutiny panels, a Member highlighted the importance of either panel Chairs or Vice Chairs being in attendance at Overview and Scrutiny Board meetings, to enable these to be delivered.

## **NOTED**

## **ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH, IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED.**

None.