

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

A meeting of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel was held on Monday 30 October 2023.

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

**OFFICERS:** R Brown, C Lunn, J Tynan and Watson.

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:** Councillor J Walker.

**DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

**MINUTES - CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY PANEL - 18 SEPTEMBER 2023**

The minutes of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 18 September 2023 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

**SCHOOL ATTENDANCE - AN INTRODUCTION**

The Director of Education and Partnerships and the Executive Director of Children's Services were in attendance to provide the scrutiny panel with a general overview and introduction to the topic.

The Director of Education and Partnerships noted the link between absence and attainment; according to the Department for Education (DfE), children with no absence were 1.3 times more likely to achieve a level four at GCSE and three times more likely to achieve a level five, compared to children with between 10 and 15% absence during key stage four. It was also highlighted that when children were in school, professionals knew they were safe and receiving meals. Reference was made to the criticalness of early attendance in terms of hierarchical learning, meaning that if a child learnt basic numerical, literacy and other skills early on, development at a later stage would be facilitated.

Members heard that school attendance in Middlesbrough was lower than the national and regional averages. Reference was made to safeguarding and reduced opportunity for this when children were not in school. The impact that absenteeism could have in terms of career development and competing against others later in life was also noted.

Further statistical information around school attendance in Middlesbrough would be provided at the panel's next scheduled meeting in December, but broadly the four issues/drivers of poor attendance were:

- Secondary age children – absenteeism was more pronounced in this group, though it was highlighted to Members that patterns did start at Primary School age, for example: a child or children regularly being late for school.
- Children with a Social Worker – it was explained that this was not a cause of absence, as Social Workers were there to help.
- High rates of persistent absence (attendance 90% or less).
- Children with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) in mainstream schools – it was explained that specialist schools had the strongest attendance in Middlesbrough. However, in instances where a child with Special Educational Needs (SEN) attended a non-specialist mainstream school, poorer attendance was observed. There could have been a number of causal factors for this, such as the

school not being able to cater for a child's needs; the remainder of the school population attended okay.

Members were informed that this was of significant concern because these were the children who benefitted most from the protective and nurturing influence of school. These groups of children:

- Were the most vulnerable, which included, for example, issues taking place at home.
- Performed the least successfully in exams.
- Were the least likely to progress into further and higher education.
- Were the most likely to be exploited. Reference was made to current research that explored the relationship between attendance, exclusion and exploitation (drugs, sexual exploitation and trafficking). If children were not in school, their whereabouts needed to be questioned.
- Were the most likely to be drawn into antisocial behaviour.

Members were informed that the legal power for school exclusions sat with headteachers. Often, schools were Academies and therefore reported directly to the DfE. However, liaison work did take place between the DfE, the Local Authority and schools.

In terms of work being undertaken to address these concerns around attendance, the panel was advised of the following:

- With the support of a DfE Attendance Advisor, the Local Authority had developed an Attendance Strategy to help support school leaders to address poor attendance, setting out where help was available. It was suggested that the document could be provided to Members for information.
- Two additional Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs), who provided pastoral support, were recruited in July 2023 to enable more targeted support to be offered to schools and families. It was explained to Members that when academies were established, there was no central funding made available for EWOs and therefore these roles needed to be bought in. Therefore, as it was at the discretion of each academy as to whether EWOs would be provided, the Local Authority had recruited two EWOs to deliver support.
- The Local Authority was part of the Attendance Alliance that was being developed in the North East by the DfE.
- The Local Authority had put in place the Vulnerable Children Attendance Project (VCAP) to bring together Social Workers, schools, and families to help remove barriers to attendance for children with a Social Worker.
- The Local Authority had negotiated an additional £350,000 of financial support from the DfE, to help those schools where pupil absence was significantly high by providing additional attendance staff. It was explained that the funding was time limited to one year. It was hoped that a collective demonstration of improved attendance could be achieved after the initial period, and that schools would continue this work going forward.
- The DfE had commissioned Barnados to run an attendance mentoring programme in Middlesbrough: mentors worked directly with children and their families where attendance had been identified by the school as a significant issue. The programme, entitled Watch Tower, provided more pastoral support, and looked at the underlying cause of non-attendance, such as issues at home, and the individual support required. The programme was free for the Local Authority; there was a joint objective for all stakeholders around improving school attendance. Opportunities to work in collaboration with the third sector were pursued wherever possible.
- The Local Authority's Educational Psychology team was developing a piece of work on emotionally based school attendance, with the aim of developing bespoke strategies to support children to improve their attendance. There had been a growth in emotionally based school avoidance since the pandemic, which was not related to schools but to other matters such as bullying. The team looked at understanding the associated causes and support required. This was a niche area, but one of growth – and the team was leading the way on it.
- All Social Workers had been supplied with web-based access to live attendance data for children to ensure they had a clear understanding of when attendance became a concern. This was critically important to ensure professional oversight and that care plan requirements were being met, for example: child to be on site, receiving meals,

- etc.
- The Local Authority was providing schools with opportunities to share best practice in improving attendance. The first sold out event was due to take place in November 2023 at Middlesbrough Football Club. National speakers would be present at the event, which was about making attendance the number one priority.

Members received an overview of the VCAP. It was explained that the project delivered the Local Authority's strategic role in promoting the education outcomes of Children With a Social Worker (CWSW), which was a requirement of the DfE June 2022 Education Document: Promoting the Education of Children with a Social Worker.

The objectives of the programme were to:

- Rigorously track local attendance data for CWSW.
- Make attendance a key focus of all frontline Council services.
- Use attendance data from all schools to identify the CWSW school age cohorts, schools, and neighbourhoods to focus on.
- Ensure all frontline staff involved in attendance, associated teams and local partners understood their role in delivering this strategy and work together.
- Have a dedicated Attendance CWSW School Officer and VCAP Lead who provided communication and advice to the following three core functions:
  1. Targeted Support Meetings.
  2. Multi-disciplinary support for families.
  3. Information, advice, and guidance to key stakeholders.

VCAP monitored and improved the attendance of CWSW by:

- Triangulating data using existing collection methods.
- Identifying children who were persistently and severally absent.
- Driving a multi-agency approach to care planning focused on improving attendance for children with below 20% attendance.
- Providing training on barriers and evidence-based strategies for all key stakeholders.

The project aimed to prevent matters escalating by capturing issues as early as possible and providing appropriate support to children and their families. Further information regarding VCAP and its performance would be provided at the panel's next scheduled meeting.

The Chair thanked the Director for the information provided; a discussion ensued and the following matters were raised by the panel:

A Member queried whether the DfE Attendance Strategy had been provided to all schools, as they did not recall seeing it. In response, the panel was advised that this would be checked.

In response to a query regarding the role of EWO staff, Members were informed that this was to identify ways to improve school attendance. Local Authorities had the power to prosecute for absenteeism, whereas schools did not. However, the preferred approach was to put more preventative measures in place to support children and their families, rather than to prosecute.

In response to a query regarding the additional £350,000 of financial support from the DfE, Members heard that, overall, £1.7m had been allocated to Middlesbrough to improve outcomes; Academies had supported the centralisation of £350,000 for the purpose of improving achievement and attendance levels. The remaining amount was placed into the maintained school system.

A Member referred to the work of EWOs and queried whether this targeted the most persistent issues across Middlesbrough. In response, Members heard that EWOs were based in the attendance team and worked with those most likely to experience low attendance.

A Member queried the emergence of attendance issues, e.g., whether they started small and accelerated over time; whether they were sudden; and/or whether they occurred predominantly at secondary age. In response, the panel heard that there was a national issue around transition, with a noticeable drop-off in attendance between primary and secondary

age groups. Primary schools offered a more nurturing environment and pointed resources in a certain way, whereas Secondary schools provided more autonomy for children, and there were points where children could disappear. Absenteeism was more observable at secondary level, but a deep dive showed that it was the same children and, for the majority, this started at Primary level.

A Member commented that schools had attempted to employ Social Workers directly, though this had had varied results. The Director referred to a national study that found having Social Workers in schools did not make a difference; however, the bridge of communication into schools was important. Reference was made to the Watch Tower project that sat at the front door of the Local Authority.

A Member referred to the academisation of schools and queried the Council's role in taking enforcement action. In response, it was explained that headteachers had the power to exclude, whereas the Local Authority had the power to prosecute parents for non-attendance. Reference was made to the old system of the Local Authority and Local Authority schools that were now academies, and there was some overlap. Further work was needed in terms of finding a solution, but that was the current system. It was highlighted that all CEOs and headteachers needed to support the notion of attendance being the priority, and then work with families to support with specific resource.

In response to a query regarding academisation and whether attendance had increased since their introduction, it was explained that this was difficult to conclude as there was no 'big bang'. However, it was noted that attendance was a significant issue now, having worsened since the pandemic for both Primary and Secondary age groups; for children with SEND who were attending mainstream schools; and for CWSWs.

A Member made reference to the impending attendance conference and queried other ways in which best practice was being served. In response, the panel was informed that a number of initiatives regularly took place. These included:

- A directors' challenge event once per team which looked at performance data and other issues.
- Working with and challenging schools directly.
- Sharing best practice with headteachers on a monthly basis.
- External challenge through OFSTED inspections.
- Formal requests to schools for details regarding their work to improve attendance.
- Constant conversation all year round with stakeholders.
- Weekly priority meetings between the Executive Director and partners.

In terms of the live attendance data provided to Social Workers, it was indicated that the ONE system was used, which provided immediate statistical information.

A discussion ensued regarding the exclusion of children. In terms of Primary aged children, Members were advised that Middlesbrough Council had not excluded any, but other Local Authorities in the region had. The procedures involved in excluding children from school were outlined to the panel. It was explained that after the sixth day of exclusion, the Local Authority assumed responsibility for the child. The child would attend the River Tees and Multi-Academy Trust, which acted as the Local Authority's Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). There was a process whereby a headteacher's decision to exclude could be challenged and overturned, which involved an independent panel hearing. It was noted that every Academy had its own behaviour policy: previous attempts had been made to uniform this, but some were national policies that individual schools did not wish to generalise.

A Member queried the number of children currently attending the River Tees and Multi-Academy Trust. In response, Members were advised that this would be checked, but the number was high in relation to the size of Middlesbrough and the number of children attending school. As it was more expensive to educate a child with alternative provision, operating this resource came at a significant cost.

A Member referred to the Barnardos Watch Tower project and queried whether a performance report was produced. In response, the panel was informed that a monthly report was prepared, and regular updates provided. As the programme had not been operating for a year, an annual report was not yet available. As a partner programme, it was not managed by

the Local Authority in any way; it was reiterated that funding was provided by the DfE.

The Chair thanked the Director of Education and Partnerships and the Executive Director of Children's Services for their attendance and contributions to the meeting.

**AGREED** that:

1. Officers would check that the DfE Attendance Strategy had been circulated to all schools. If not, this would be carried out.
2. Officers would ascertain the current number of children attending the River Tees and Multi-Academy Trust and advise Members accordingly.
3. The information, as presented, be noted.

### **SOUTH TEES SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP (STSCP) - ANNUAL REPORT 2022/2023**

The STSCP Partnership Manager was in attendance to provide Members with an overview of the local partnership arrangements for safeguarding children, the work undertaken by the STSCP and to highlight areas of significance within the 2022/2023 Annual Report.

Members were informed that the STSCP was established in 2019 in response to changes to the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements introduced in the Children and Social Work Act 2017. It succeeded the Middlesbrough Local Safeguarding Children Board and the Redcar and Cleveland Safeguarding Children Board (LSCBs). The STSCP was a formal partnership between the two South Tees Local Authorities of Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland, Cleveland Police and North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board. The partners had a shared ambition to improve the lives of the most vulnerable children in their area, many of whom faced multiple disadvantage; the STSCP oversaw some of the most deprived areas in the country.

The Annual Report covered the year 2022/2023 and was published by the four statutory partners. The report summarised and reflected on the work of the STSCP, covering the third full financial year of operation.

The contents of the report included:

- The scrutineer's view of the last year.
- Evidence of the impact on 2020-2023 priorities.
- Local context.
- Local safeguarding.
- How the STSCP impacted its priorities.
- Partnership working.
- Learning and development.
- Quality assurance and performance.
- Key priority themes.
- Response to the national agenda.

The report highlighted the effective joint working that had continued and been further strengthened, and set out critical areas of development to further improve the effectiveness of the statutory partnership arrangements. These included the need for a robust multi-agency quality assurance framework and using the learning from serious safeguarding incidents and auditing to make a difference to practice and service provision.

Members heard that, during this period, the STSCP had completed three rapid reviews, initiated two Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPR) - previously known as Serious Case Reviews - and signed off a further CSPR from early 2022. It was explained that reviews were undertaken and sent to a Government Safeguarding Panel for review. This was a key role for the STSCP, which at one stage had ten serious incidents to review, currently it had none; high risk was managed by agencies. The Partnership also completed several multi-agency audits, including the Section 11 audit of key partners.

Reference was made to the significant challenge that the STSCP faced in the wake of COVID-19, which required new ways of working. It was explained that all activity continued virtually – the Partnership Manager credited the Local Authorities’ approach to technology, which had allowed safeguarding work to continue. Emergence from the pandemic had presented both significant challenge and change, for example: behavioural changes in young people, some as young as ten, were being seen – with some carrying weapons. Members heard that there was work to do in terms of addressing crime, county lines and national agendas to tackle exploitation.

The panel was informed of the cross-boundary work that was taking place between Middlesbrough and other areas in the Tees Valley, which was part of an overarching strategic approach. It was explained that young people did not adhere to specific boundaries and would commit crime in other areas. Middlesbrough was central to Tees and had a transient population; mention was made of the port in Redcar and Cleveland. It was noted that some very serious matters involving young people were taking place.

The STSCP operated a Tees-wide panel that focused on unexpected infant mortality. It was noted that there was a link to neglect and poverty in this regard; reference was made to a poverty agenda that was beginning to make inroads. Members were informed that a recently completed review focused on the death of a child from a Czech family, which involved neglect; the impact of transience was also noted.

Members were advised that the stability of the STSCP had made a difference in delivering key strategic priorities, which focused on:

- Exploitation.
- Neglect.
- The voice of the child/young person.
- Working together.

The panel heard that the internet was a key driver within people. Mention was made of the various devices available to young people that could potentially expose them to risk, including smartphones, mobile phones, computers, laptops, and tablets. Young people were resourceful and could access equipment relatively easily.

In terms of case studies and reporting findings in the annual report, it was explained to Members that although the report included cases studies and statistical data, no personal case details were published. An independent scrutineer oversaw the work of the STSCP.

A discussion ensued and the following issues were raised by Members:

A Member requested clarification on the activities that were delivered by the STSCP. In response, it was explained that public bodies delivered statutory duties around safeguarding, but this did not always occur. It was therefore important that learning was achieved and partners given feedback, which would subsequently be tested to ensure effectiveness. Reference was made to a previous CSPR review and a publicity campaign that followed from it. In addition to this work, the STSCP delivered training and eLearning events to various stakeholders. It was noted that resources were minimal in relation to the work required; an independent person to undertake reviews needed to be commissioned. The partnership was able to bring stakeholders together and discuss priorities, of which exploitation and neglect were key.

In response to a query regarding partners, Members were advised that all the necessary partners were involved, i.e., Local Authority, Police and Health. It was indicated that meetings with the CEOs from the two Local Authorities and the Health Trust were held twice annually.

In response to a query regarding the STSCP and statutory duties, reference was made to the Children Act and sections 17 and 47 of legislation, which compelled partners to work together to protect children. A ‘Working Together’ document, which was last updated in 2018, was currently being worked on for 2023 publication.

A Member queried performance measurement and the ways in which this was achieved. In response, it was explained that having fewer reviews to undertake was a positive indicator. In addition, external validation by OFSTED, which looked at the partnership, together with

scrutiny by an independent scrutineer, was also carried out. It was about challenging one another and learning from individual cases.

A Member referred to the child death that had occurred after the Czech family had moved to Middlesbrough, and queried record transfer/management. In response, it was explained that information did not always follow individuals and therefore missed opportunities could and did occur. It was explained that, in this particular case, house moves were later discovered through health records. The advantage of having partners around the table and carrying out a shared approach was highlighted. It was noted that there were often several issues taking place and cases could be exceptionally complex.

The Chair thanked the officer for his attendance and contribution to the meeting.

**NOTED**

#### **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE**

The Chair provided a verbal update on the matters that were considered at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meetings held on 20 September 2023 and 18 October 2023.

**NOTED**

#### **DATE OF NEXT MEETING - 4 DECEMBER 2023**

**NOTED**

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

None.