

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

**A meeting of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel was held on 11 March 2024.**

**PRESENT:** Councillors: Clynch (Chair), J Walker (Vice Chair), Hill, Kabuye, Nugent and S Platt.

**OFFICERS:** D Alaszewski, R Brown and J Dixon.

**\*\* DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

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

**MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING OF THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON 15 JANUARY 2024**

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel held on 15 January 2024 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

**INCREASED RESIDENTIAL AND SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION FOR CHILDREN IN OUR CARE AND CARE LEAVERS**

D Alaszewski, Director of Children's Care, accompanied by R Brown, Director of Education and Partnerships, was in attendance at the meeting to provide the Panel with a presentation in relation to proposals to increase residential and supported accommodation for children in our care and care leavers.

It was recognised that children's homes provided support and care for some of Middlesbrough's most vulnerable children and young people and Middlesbrough Council wanted each child in care to be provided with the right placement at the right time, and for residential children's care to be a positive, beneficial choice for the children and young people living in children's homes.

The Panel heard that there had been a historical agreement to renovate two properties in Middlesbrough, at a cost of approximately £2 million, however, alternative options had been examined to attempt to obtain properties that were already fit for purpose at a lower cost. There was now an option to purchase a nearly new property with parking in a less built-up area of Middlesbrough. A similar presentation had been submitted to the Council's Executive recently and the proposals were approved.

As of January 2024, Middlesbrough had 97 children living in residential placements - 76 of which were external placements, having utilised almost all in-house placements. It was acknowledged that the use of external residential placements was a significant issue nationally and not just in Middlesbrough. In addition, there were 372 children in foster care and 59 children in 'other' placements. This equated to 528 children in care in Middlesbrough, however, it was highlighted that this figure fluctuated on a daily basis.

A breakdown of the residential placements was provided which included 18 high-cost group home placements and 14 high-cost post-16 placements (more than £2,500 per week).

It was explained to the Panel that Middlesbrough Council planned to increase its residential and supported accommodation by a total of a minimum 15 beds. In 2024/25 it was planned to purchase two properties to convert into children's homes, offering a total of six beds. The approximate cost of this would be £800,000. A further property would be purchased in 2025/26 to provide three beds and it was planned to purchase an additional two properties in 2026/27 to provide a further six beds in total.

These proposals had been approved by the Executive and an offer had been made on one potential

property already. Once the property had been secured, suitable staff would need to be recruited and appointed in accordance with registration procedures – which could take up to six months.

It was proposed to increase the supported accommodation offer by partnering with commissioned providers who would form part of the Children's Care residential and supported accommodation offer to bring additional placements from 2025/26.

There would also be a review of the current in-house residential and supported accommodation offer to identify opportunities for selling bed space from Gleneagles, and other vacant bed space, to other local authorities where it was surplus to Middlesbrough's requirements from 2024/25.

The cost of increasing placements for children and young people was expected to be £4.44 million, and this was approved as part of the Capital Programme for 2023/24. The measures described above projected a saving of £1.95 million up to 2028, factoring in costs of external placements, numbers of children in care, staffing costs and commissioning arrangements.

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

- In response to a query, it was confirmed that Gleneagles currently provided short break care (respite) for children with disabilities.
- Reference was made to the £800,000 cost of purchasing the two residential properties and it was queried whether this was solely the purchase cost or whether this included the cost of any adaptations/refurbishment. It was confirmed that this was purely the purchase costs. Previously a potential property was identified, however, it required a considerable amount of money spending on it to bring it up to date, including replacement windows and testing for asbestos, etc as it was an older building. The total cost would have been significantly higher than the property that had now been identified which was a newer build.
- Reference was made to selling bed space at Gleneagles and it was queried how often this would happen and how long for. It was highlighted that Middlesbrough already had a residential home, Holly Lodge, for young people with complex needs and that another local authority had been paying for a placement in that home for the last two years. Some placements there were long term and some were short term. In terms of Gleneagles, it needed to be ensured that the children who currently used it for respite would not be affected and that appropriate matching for any placements buying into the service was undertaken.
- It was further clarified that for any residential placements, the designated Registered Individual (Future for Families Service Manager for residential placements or the Director of Education and Partnerships for Supported Accommodation), would need to give their approval for any placements after all the necessary checks had been undertaken.
- It was highlighted that providing in-house residential accommodation came with risks and many local authorities had stepped away from providing their own. Homes were inspected on a regular basis and the more homes that were owned, the higher the risk. Increased inspection regime, more risk around staffing as there were issues nationally with recruitment of staff. It would be a challenge to get the right balance but this would ensure protecting children and keeping them safe.
- A Member referred to the 528 children currently in care and asked what the plan was to safely reduce the number. The Panel was advised that due to an administrative issue with the IT system used to record the numbers of children in care, there were currently 12 fewer children that were no longer classed as being in care but had yet to be shown as such on the system. Several things needed to happen when a child was no longer 'in care' such as ensuring the placement ended properly and was recorded properly. It had also been observed that demand was reducing and two years ago there were more than 700 children in care in Middlesbrough. It was explained that there were a number of children who were subject to Care Orders with parents and all of these would be reviewed to check whether the arrangement remained

suitable. It was hoped that during the next year the number of children in care would reduce by 100 due to the measures being taken and stability in management due to the recruitment of a permanent Head of Service and Director.

- A Member of the Panel stated it would be good to have sight of the risk assessments undertaken on the new residential homes. The Director stated that this was multi-faceted in terms of risk-assessing the property, the staff, the young people who would be living there. It was acknowledged that it was an ambitious plan and came with risks and a robust inspection regime, however, it was considered that if the right balance was struck it would be beneficial for the young people it would serve and help reduce costs overall to the Council.
- In response to a query it was clarified that the admin system issues referred to occurred when certain paperwork needed to be added to the system once a court order had ended so although the child was no longer classed as being in care, they would still show as such on the system until all the necessary paperwork had been inputted.
- It was queried what the 'staying close' arrangement was in relation to Rosecroft. It was explained that the staying close arrangement provided support to young people aged 16-18 looking to secure their own tenancy. This included preparing them for living in their own tenancy, life skills and budgeting.
- Reference was made to the 76 external residential placements and it was queried how many of them were outside of Middlesbrough. It was stated that whilst many of them were outside of Middlesbrough, they were generally within 20 miles of the town. This was something that Middlesbrough was doing well.
- In response to a query, it was clarified that the local authority had a responsibility to provide support to children and young people up to the age of 25 if they had an identified Special Education Need or Disability and up to the age of 18 if looked after. Once a looked after young person reached the age of 18, they would no longer have a named Social Worker but would be allocated a Personal Adviser from the Pathways Leaving Care Team, who would support them up to the age of 24. PAs provided a lower level of support by keeping in touch with the young person regularly and helping them to access further education and employment opportunities and benefits. Further support for care leavers was provided via the 'We Matter Ambassadors' and Staying Put outreach. This combined to offer signposting and support in a wide range of areas including life skills such as cooking and financial management, access to education and employment and benefit entitlement.
- In response to a question regarding support from Adult Social Care, it was confirmed that once a young person left care they did not automatically transfer to an adult Social Worker. The criteria for meeting the threshold for Adult Social Care support would only be met if the young person had a physical or mental health disability.
- Reference was made to kinship carers and it was queried how this process worked. It was explained that where a child became 'looked after', if a family member stepped forward to care for the child, subject to their suitability, they would become a 'connected persons foster carer', or kinship carer. This was very similar to being a foster carer and they must complete all appropriate training in the same way as a foster carer. Alongside this, a Special Guardianship Order assessment was carried out. Once a Special Guardianship Order was granted in respect of the child they were caring for, the child was no longer 'looked after' and local authority involvement ceased, with the carer gaining parental responsibility for the child. A Special Guardianship allowance was paid and recent legislation set out a number of benefits that Special Guardians were entitled to. The connected persons fostering allowance was currently being reviewed to ensure it was better aligned to the fostering allowance.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance and the useful information provided.

**AGREED** that the information provided be noted.

## DISCUSSION ITEM – SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

The Chair asked the Panel to consider possible lines of enquiry and evidence gathering for its current scrutiny topic of School Attendance, with input from the Director of Education and Partnerships.

In terms of school attendance, the Director stated that there had almost been a cultural acceptance of high non-attendance but they were now starting to see a percentage point shift. With that in mind, it was suggested that the Panel may wish to gather evidence on 'what was starting to make a positive difference'.

It was suggested that the Panel may wish to speak to:-

- The additional staff funded by the DfE, employed in relation to increasing school attendance.
- Barnardos – working with whole families to improve attendance.
- A Primary and a Secondary school.

A Panel Member commented that it was good to hear that attendance had begun to improve and it was queried whether the improvement was with those schools who had previously been identified as having significant attendance issues or whether the improvements were elsewhere. The Director responded that attendance was more difficult to analyse in secondary schools, however, those with the weakest attendance tended to be those new to social care within the child protection arena.

It was felt it would be useful to consider, in both primary and secondary schools, what each was doing in terms of child protection, SEND, children in need, children in care.

There was a correlation between attendance and child protection cases, for example it may be due to domestic violence in the home, therefore, the child might not go into school the next day. There tended to be different issues around children with SEND, for example, the child might not want to or feel able to cope with going to school, not that the parents could not take them. In some cases, a child might be too poorly to attend, for example with Priory Woods where children had significant health needs.

It was queried where the Virtual School fitted within this issue. It was highlighted that the Virtual School provided wrap-around support to champion the education of the young person in care. This duty extended into child protection and children in need – so for all vulnerable children.

The Vulnerable Children Attendance Project (VCAP) monitored and tracked the attendance of vulnerable children in Middlesbrough by contacting schools daily to check whether the registered vulnerable children on record were in attendance. It was suggested that it might be worthwhile receiving a presentation from the Head of the Virtual School in relation to the project.

In addition, the PROCLAIM Project (Providing Rich Opportunities for Children Living Around and in Middlesbrough) was working within some schools to provide a trauma-informed approach to supporting vulnerable students. For example, a child may be sent home from school for wearing incorrect uniform, whereas a Proclaim school would not do this but would engage with the student to find out why it had happened.

In response to a query it was confirmed that the local authority's working relationship with Academies had improved significantly and meetings were held at least three times a year. There had been a previous reluctance to share data but this had improved.

It was queried whether there was still an issue with exclusions. In response it was stated that whilst exclusions in Middlesbrough remained high, it had improved. It was acknowledged that this issue went hand in hand with attendance and it was important to know the reasons leading to an exclusion.

Panel Members also expressed an interest in gaining parents' views via the schools if possible.

The Chair suggested, given the content of the discussion, that he should meet with the Director of Education and Partnerships to discuss possible agenda content for the next few meetings and present this information to the Panel at its next meeting on 8 April 2024.

**AGREED** as follows:-

1. That the discussion be noted.
2. That the Chair meet with the Director of Education and Partnerships in terms of planning future meeting content and report back to the Panel at its next meeting on 8 April 2024.

## **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE**

The Chair provided a verbal update in relation to the business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meetings held on 10 and 18 January, 7 and 28 February and 6 March 2024, namely:

Each meeting considered:-

- Executive Forward Work Programme
- Scrutiny Chairs' Updates

### 10 January 2024

- Council Budget 2024/25 and Medium-Term Financial Plan Refresh

### 18 January 2024

- Budget Consultation – Scrutiny Feedback
- Local Government Boundary Review – Phase Two

### 7 February 2024

- Ward Boundary Update
- OSB Work Programme discussion

### 28 February 2024

- Executive Member Update – Environment
- Local Government Boundary Review Update

### 6 March 2024

- Executive Member Update – Community Safety

## **DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel was scheduled to take place on Monday, 8 April 2024 at 4.30pm.