

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 7 December 2020.

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

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

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillor Hellaoui – Chair of Corporate Parenting Board.

PRESENT AS AN OBSERVER: A Baxter – LGA.

APOLOGIES for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Saunders and Councillor High (Lead Member for Children's Social Care).

**** 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 9 November 2020 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

The Chair welcomed Councillor Higgins who had joined as a Member of the Panel, replacing Councillor Wright.

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

S Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services, R Farnham, Director of Children's Care, P Jemson, Head of Children Looked After and Corporate Parenting, and R Hamer, Service Manager for Futures for Families, were in attendance at the meeting to provide the Panel with information in relation to its current scrutiny topic, with particular focus on Futures for Families and the Innovate Team.

The presentation began with an overview of the children looked after cohort up to 31 October and their journey over the past 12 months.

296 children had a new episode of becoming looked after during this period. Some children might have come in and out of care more than once. 10% (29) of the cohort became looked after for a second time or more. 67% of those children were subject to a Child Protection Plan prior to coming into care. This meant that 33% became looked after having no previous child protection involvement.

44.9% had multiple referrals prior to them becoming looked after – "start again syndrome" where children are referred in, then the case was closed once the parenting/home situation improved to an acceptable standard. Once social work involvement ceased, standards could deteriorate again resulting in repeated referrals and assessments.

34% had Early Help intervention prior to becoming looked after. That means 65% had no Early Help intervention.

18% (53) who became looked after in last 12 months were no longer in the local authority's care. 28.3% moved on to a Special Guardianship Order; 32% exited on a child arrangement order; 19% were planned or unplanned moves home with parents or person with parental responsibility and

1.9% stopped being 'looked after' as they reached the age of 18 – although work was continued with care leavers.

82% (243) of children who became looked after in the last 12 months (of the 293) remained in the authority's care. Of those 243 children, 75% remained in short term foster care. 0.4% were in long term foster care. 17% were placed with parents/persons with PR on a care order. 5.8% were placed in residential homes, supported accommodation or hostels.

Futures for Families

R Hamer, Service Manager, Futures for Families, was in attendance to inform the Panel about Futures for Families and progress to date.

The Panel was informed that Futures for Families 'went live' in September 2020. During September, Futures for Families provided edge of care support to 14 young people in fragile placements and provided in-reach support from the hub to three young people. In October the number of young people in fragile placements supported by Futures for Families increased to 38 and the hub provided in-reach support to four young people. In November, 39 fragile placements were supported and five young people were provided with in-reach support by the hub.

In response to a query, it was clarified that a 'fragile' placement was a difficult placement where the child/young person and/or foster carers were struggling and the placement was at risk of breaking down. Futures for Families was able to offer respite or planned work with the life coach and to offer various means of support to help prevent placement breakdowns. In addition, where families were edging towards care, Futures for Families could offer the family respite in the hub. This support was not previously available.

It was noted that there had been an increase in the numbers of young people supported by Futures for Families in October and November and this was probably due to raising awareness of the support available across Children's Services.

Since the presentation was written, a further three young people were about to start receiving in-reach support in the hub, two to three days per week. Those that had been supported in crisis, no longer required support and Futures for Families had stepped away. Where young people were being supported in a regular placement, Futures for Families had been able to support them to enable them to remain in the placement.

The impact of Futures for Families in the short time it had been operating had been analysed by the Innovate Team and North Yorkshire Council. They had looked at 40 young people's care experiences and the outcomes had been shared with Social Work Teams and Principal Social Workers to improve practice. It was identified that one area where young people struggled was with the transition from primary to secondary school and this had caused placements and home lives to breakdown. So instead of providing support to 12-25 year old age range, Future for Families provided support from age 11-25 so that they could provide support to young people during that transition.

75% of all young people accessing Futures for Families were receiving support from the Life Coach. This support was either direct (face to face therapeutic sessions) or indirect (where the Life Coach provided strategies to the people working with the young person). Of those accessing such support, 92% had no previously identified need.

Previously, 32.5% of young people had an undiagnosed speech and language difficulty. Of those, 92% were male. Following research by Durham and North Yorkshire Councils, it was expected that the 32.5% figure would increase to more than 50% as the Communication Support Worker worked with more young people. Support was introduced gradually in order to build a solid foundation to help each young person and their specific needs.

A graph was shown detailing the total number of hours direct support that had been provided in

September – 99 hours; October - 151; and November – 177. Whilst the number of direct support hours provided had increased month on month, it was acknowledged that Covid had affected the work being undertaken. Young people self-isolating from school were unable to visit the hub and staff had been deployed to try to give support where it was most needed. Due to covid restrictions young people could only be worked with for a short time in the family home, so visits were shorter than they would normally be.

Data on activity for each intervention type was provided. Building relationships and emotional and mental health were the highest support provision. Provision of activities was much lower than it would normally be due to covid restrictions.

Members were informed that, during the past 12 months, 11 young people had a total of 94 missing episodes. Due to targeted outreach work, all of those young people had seen a reduction of between 50 and 100% in missing episodes. Of those young people, 36% had not experienced any further missing episodes since receiving support from Futures for Families.

Futures for Families was supporting nine young people to return to their families or a connected persons/foster placement from expensive residential placements.

A Member of the Panel asked how those missing children were monitored and how Futures for Families were made aware that the young person was missing and how they helped to stop them going missing in the future. The Service Manager advised that a Police Data Analyst and Intervention Officer were part of the team that built up relationships to understand why young people went missing and they worked closely with Social Care colleagues and there had been a reduction in missing episodes. In addition, multi-agency RAISE meetings were held for young people where there were significant concerns.

Innovate – Commissioned Service

The Director of Children's Services advised the Panel that following examination of Middlesbrough's placement data and as part of the strategy to improve permanence and to address the concerns of Ofsted in its last inspection, Children's Services commissioned the Innovate Team in July 2020.

The placement data showed that:-

- Long term permanence for children was not achieved quickly enough. This undermined their ability to create attachments, feel secure and support their emotional wellbeing.
- Too many children were placed on a Care Order (meaning they were officially looked after) but remained at home with parents.
- There were currently too many children in residential placements and not enough children in placements with Middlesbrough Council employed foster carers.
- There were not enough Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) as a plan of permanence despite a high proportion of children being placed with connected persons carers (family and friends/kinship care). SGOs were permanent plans for looked after children enabling them to remain with family members/friends and the local authority then discharged the child from being looked after. During 2020/21 there was a reduction in the number of SGOs from 10 in quarter 1, to eight in quarter 2.
- Given the numbers and age demographic of Middlesbrough's children looked after population, not enough children were being adopted in a timely way. Whilst covid had impacted on this more recently, it was an issue previously.

The Innovate Team was a commissioned Team of Social Workers to progress 90 children subject to Care Orders. The aim of the intervention was to provide permanence; placement stability; support children out of residential placements back into family life – improving outcomes for children

and reducing the numbers of children looked after in Middlesbrough.

The Team had been working with four key cohorts:-

- Children in residential placements.
- Children placed with parents where the discharge of a Care Order was required.
- Children living with a Connected Persons Foster Carer where the plan was to progress to a Special Guardianship Order.
- Children living with a Foster Carer where support was needed to prevent the placement breaking down and a future move.

The impact of the work undertaken to date by the Innovate Team was summarised as follows:-

- 19 children in external residential placements had been worked with. This included a full review of assessments and care plans. It was concluded that 17 of those were assessed as suitable to be moved.
 - 3 were moved to foster care placements.
 - 3 were rehabilitated back home.
 - All 6 had been moved closer to Middlesbrough.
 - 3 had moving dates scheduled.
 - The remaining 8 were expected to move by the end of 2020.
- The remaining two children in external residential placements were currently in their final year of secondary school and it was considered not to be appropriate to move them at this point whilst they were in their GCSE year.
- There had been a significant cost benefit in moving the young people from external residential placements as well as securing better outcomes for them. Cost reductions of approximately £797,000 for the full year based on four young people being moved had been identified.
- Of the 90 children worked with, 10 were subject to Care Orders whilst placed at home with parents. All 10 were progressing through the Courts. Since the report was written, three children had now had their Care Orders revoked and the remaining seven were expected to be revoked by the end of the year. The children were appropriately placed with parents and had ceased to be looked after.
- In terms of cost benefits, it was noted that reductions in the length of time spent in care resulted in a weekly cost avoidance of approximately £323 per child.
- Of the 90 children worked with, 45 were placed in Connected Persons Foster Care placements. Of those 45 children:-
 - Three had been placed back home and six were in the process of being rehabilitated back home due to sustained changes made by parents.
 - 22 children were actively moving down the Special Guardianship Order pathway, with Court dates for some having been set.
 - 14 children were subject to further negotiations and planning with possible guardians, with nearly all expected to go ahead.
 - In terms of cost benefits, it was noted that reductions in the length of time spent in care resulted in a weekly cost avoidance of approximately £189 per child.
- Intensive intervention had been undertaken with 16 children in fragile placements where a breakdown would have resulted in a further move or an escalation to residential care. All 16 were being successfully maintained in their current placements.
- Preventing a move to residential care resulted in a cost avoidance of approximately £2,881 per child.

The Panel was provided with two case studies showing the work that had been undertaken by the Innovate Team and how some of this work dove-tailed with Futures for Families.

Possible 'green shoots', made following the last Ofsted inspection due to the work of Innovate and Futures for Families had been identified.

Connected Persons Carers

30% of Middlesbrough's children looked after were placed in a connected carer placement (family members or friends and the child subject of a Care Order). This was the most prevalent placement type.

In the last 12 months, 167 children ceased to be looked after and almost half of those exited a connected care placement. This meant that Children's Services was better at moving children into permanence via a Special Guardianship Order or back home than from any other placement type.

In the last three months, more connected carer placements had ceased (33) than had started (31). Forecasting based on a three month average showed a decline in the use of connected carer placements. This was partly due to improved throughput of children in care case work and a shift in care planning as greater exploration of placements that best suited the child's needs was being undertaken. Progress was being made but this was still an area that required improvement.

Placement with Parent

It was explained that the term 'Placement with Parent' was used when a child was subject to a Care Order (looked after by the local authority) but lived with a parent. Such placements should be short term, temporary arrangements.

The Panel was informed that the number of placements with parents was much higher in Middlesbrough than all comparators and this was partly due to a legacy of poor practice resulting in the Courts not having sufficient confidence in the quality of social work practice and, therefore, ordering Care Orders to support additional oversight. It was highlighted, however, that audits suggested that Care Orders had not improved social care oversight of the case – ie, social workers had not worked effectively on the case resulting in families remaining on Care Orders for long periods of time. In such cases, either the Care Order should have been discharged much earlier or, in some cases, the child had been left in a neglectful situation for too long resulting in being taken into care. It was acknowledged that relationships between Children's Services and the Courts were being strengthened.

It was reported that as of the end of October, 87 children were in placements with parents. This figure had increased by 20% in the last 12 months; 13% in the last six months and 1% in the last three months. These children spent an average of 16 months in their placement with parents. 36 of those children were placed with parents for longer than one year; 21 were placed for more than two years; and 10 were placed for more than three years.

The most recent data showed that, over the last three months, for the first time ever, more children ceased to be looked after in placements with parents than those that started being looked after in this placement type. In the last three months, there had been 12 new placement with parent arrangements and 16 children had ceased to be looked after under this type of arrangement.

External Residential and Fostering Placements

The Panel was informed that there were currently 177 in-house placements due to a concerted effort to make best use of all available capacity in the system. This had included a recruitment drive, the broadening of approval criteria and strengthening of foster care management. It was highlighted that exemptions could be used on a short term basis, for example, where a foster carer's registration category was to care for one child aged 5-10 years, if it was deemed to be a suitable placement they may be asked if they would consider caring for a four year old or an 11

year old, or to care for two siblings, etc. It was about using resources wisely.

There were currently 154 Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements in use and it was noted that, in the last six months, there had been a reduction in the use of IFA placements by 4%. In addition, there had been an increase in the use of in-house placements by 14% compared to the same period last year. This enabled Social Workers to maintain children in local foster care placements and to reduce the cost of external placements. The work being undertaken by Futures for Families and Innovate to support fragile placements was starting to have a positive impact. Of the 16 children currently being supported from within the Innovate Team, all had maintained their current placements.

Data forecasts were provided based on trends over the past three, six, 12, 24 and 36 months in relation to use of connected carer placements, placement with parent and external residential and fostering placements. Each showed a significant positive impact if the current three month average trend continued.

It was highlighted that a Permanence Monitoring Group, chaired by the Head of Children Looked After and Corporate Parenting, had been embedded into practice. Social Workers and Team Managers looked at cases to ensure they had been actioned appropriately and that children received permanency in a timely way.

Members were afforded the opportunity to ask questions and the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel Member noted that one external placement of a young person had been in Scotland and sought clarification as to how this placement was managed due to differences in English and Scottish laws/regulations. The Director of Children's Care responded that the young person had been placed there due to availability of placements at the time. Childcare legislation differed in Scotland and the authority had to instruct a barrister to make the application for the necessary changes for a Scottish home to care for the young person. This was necessary to bridge the differences in legislation. It was highlighted that this young person was now placed back in the local area. It was highlighted that performance data showed 82% of children looked after were placed within a 20 mile radius of Middlesbrough and only 18% were living more than 20 miles away.
- A Member queried how many referrals, on average, were made in relation to a child before they were taken into care. The Executive Director stated that the information could be compiled and circulated to the Panel.
- In response to a query, it was confirmed that the Innovate Team consisted of a Team Manager and five Social Workers and that there were currently 211 children placed with Connected Persons Carers (there were not 211 Connected Persons Carers however as some of those children were placed in sibling groups).
- With reference to the number of children currently looked after, it was queried whether further details could be provided of the locations of the placements. The Director of Children's Care agreed to provide this information to the Panel.
- Further explanation was sought in relation to the number of children (67% of 296 children) that had been subject to a child protection plan at some point before becoming looked after. The Director explained that 33% had not been subject to a child protection plan prior to becoming looked after which meant they had not received any intervention prior to coming into care. The figure of 67% should be much higher as this would mean that those children had received some type of preventative work. Lower level intervention via Early Help should be much higher and becoming looked after should be the absolute last resort if a child was not able to live safely with their parents. It should not be that children were taken directly into care without any prior Child Protection intervention. It was highlighted that the number of children becoming looked after had started to reduce.

- A Member asked what the definition of a short term placement was and the maximum length of time a short term placement should be. The Director responded that ideally a short term placement should not exceed six months. It was highlighted that once a child became looked after, a looked after review was held at around four months and at this point a permanency plan should be in progress. The timescale for care proceedings was around 26 weeks. It was acknowledged that whilst the data management system used by Children's Services identified short term and long term placements it did not necessarily correlate the length of time of the placements and this could be taken on board.
- In relation to a question regarding family finding, it was confirmed that assessments were undertaken on any family members that came forward to care for the child. This should not be done in a linear way as it could cause delays in care proceedings. Previous practice had been to sometimes place a child with family in a connected persons placement whilst assessments were undertaken but this had resulted in children remaining in the placement for too long. It was suggested that it may be better to place children with mainstream foster carers whilst family members were assessed to ensure that it was the most appropriate placement for the child.
- A Panel Member made reference to Case Study One within the presentation and queried how long the young person had been in care and for how much longer than required and what quality assurance processes were now in place to ensure this did not happen in the future. The Director advised that the young person in this case had been in a residential placement for three years. Following a review of assessments and care planning, it became clear in July that the young person could return home to the care of mum. In terms of quality assurance processes, the weekly Permanency Monitoring Group was crucial and was reviewing all young people's care plans.
- A Panel Member referred to the Innovate Team as being an externally commissioned service and asked whether Children's Services was confident that the outcomes achieved were in the best interests of the children. The Director responded that Children's Services looked at the quality of the assessments and care plans and provided a lot of audit and oversight to ensure the quality of work was what was required. There were also tight arrangements in place to monitor the contract and outcomes. In addition, Innovate had been used previously and had performed well, achieving what had been asked of them.
- Reference was made to the recruitment and retention of foster carers. It was acknowledged that it could be a very stressful role and it was queried what support and training was offered to nurture those carers and how were their opinions monitored. The Panel was advised that foster carers each had their own Supervising Social Worker that visited once a month, or more often if needed. The Supervising Social Worker was always on hand to provide support and guidance generally and during times of crisis. The Worker also regularly reviewed training needs and worked closely with the Social Worker of any child/children in placement. Out of hours support was also available to carers. A Foster Carers Association had been established for carers to discuss how they were feeling and how improvements could be made. Annual Foster Carer reviews were also held which provided carers with the opportunity to raise any issues they might have. Each foster carer's annual review was submitted to Family Placement Panel and recommendations made by the Panel, for example, changes to registration criteria, etc were considered by the Agency Decision Maker for final approval (or otherwise). It was also highlighted that there would be discussions with the authority's partners in practice in the new year to examine reviewing Middlesbrough's foster carer offer.
- It was queried whether the authority tracked the number of Special Guardianship placements that were ended by the carers. The Director advised that once a Special Guardianship Order had been granted, the local authority would not ordinarily have any long term engagement with the family as the child would be deemed to be safe with their carer. The authority would be aware of how many special guardians came back to the authority for support but did not routinely track this.

- In response to a query regarding contact arrangements for SGO placements, it was explained that when the local authority made an application for a Special Guardianship Order, it was a requirement to have a support plan including support packages and proposed contact plans in order to maintain stability. The authority would always look to family members to support contact if it could be done safely. Professionals involved with the family would generally hold a family group conference to identify a suitable person to supervise the contact. If it was not possible or appropriate for a family member to supervise contact, the local authority would supervise.
- It was queried whether there was a support group for foster carers. The Panel was advised that apart from the support offered by the service, coffee mornings and similar events were organised for carers.
- Reference was made to the statement that Middlesbrough was better at moving children into SGO placements when they were already placed with connected persons carers and it was queried what the reasons for this were. The Director informed that based on the data examined for each cohort of children looked after, it was identified that, in the last 12 months, Children's Services had been better at progressing to SGOs than any other placement type despite issues with delay.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their attendance and informative presentation.

AGREED that the information provided be noted and considered in the context of the Panel's current scrutiny topic.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

A verbal update was provided in relation to the business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meetings held on 20 November and 3 December 2020, namely:-

20 November 2020

Call-In – Future Accommodation.

3 December 2020

- Executive Forward Work Programme.
- Middlesbrough Council's Response to Covid-19 Response – Chief Executive & Director of Public Health.
- Executive Member update – Executive Member for Environment (Councillor McCabe)
- 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, 18 January 2021 at 4.00pm.