

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel was held on Monday, 8 April 2024.

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

OFFICERS: L Garforth, C Lunn, M McCreedy, L Mitchell and J Tynan.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors J Walker, S Hill and J Nicholson.

23/38 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Name of Member	Type of Interest	Item/Nature of Interest
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.

23/39 **MINUTES - CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY PANEL - 11 MARCH 2024**

The minutes of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 11 March 2024 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

23/40 **SCHOOL ATTENDANCE - FURTHER EVIDENCE**

The following officers were in attendance at the meeting to provide information to the panel:

- The Attendance Manager;
- An Education Welfare Officer;
- The Executive Director of Children's Services; and
- The Specialist Senior Educational Psychologist.

The Specialist Senior Educational Psychologist delivered a presentation detailing the Providing Rich Opportunities for Children who are Looked After In Middlesbrough (PROCLAIM) programme. The presentation covered the following topics:

- Overview and historical context of the PROCLAIM programme.
- Why PROCLAIM was important.
- The theoretical underpinnings of PROCLAIM.
- The practical implementation of PROCLAIM.
- The impact that PROCLAIM had had on school attendance to date.
- Further resources for information regarding the PROCLAIM programme.

The panel was informed that PROCLAIM's journey began in 2018. The aim of the programme was to support all schools in Middlesbrough to become more attachment and trauma informed by 2025, so everyone could enjoy, achieve and thrive in school. An initial pilot training programme had commenced with one secondary school and one primary school. Following very positive feedback, a more formal offer was devised for schools, which included an application process and a larger team.

It was explained that the programme now had a significant strategic team at its core, which involved the Educational Psychology Service, virtual schools, therapists, training personnel, and a consultant with links across the UK who could advise on the work of both the local team and others based elsewhere. The programme was research based and the team heavily strategically focused.

In terms of the importance of delivering the programme to schools, it was explained that attachment theory referred to relationships people had and developed; the example of those

between children and influential adults, such as primary caregivers and teachers, was provided. Secure relationships built on safe space had an impact on social, educational and development success, and it was important that school staff knew about this in order to develop competent skills. Members heard that Looked After Children experienced disruptive relationships in their lives, and it was secure relationships that helped children to develop skills to learn. PROCLAIM was needed to help adults in school understand how traumatic events, such as loss, abuse and neglect, impacted young people, and how basic needs had not been met.

Reference was made to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as loss, separation, abuse and neglect, and it was highlighted that safety and security provided the basis for forming relationships at home, in school and in the workplace. Trauma affected both the brain and body, with the brain wiring differently after traumatic events. It was indicated to the panel that following such instances, individuals were less likely to develop the skills necessary to focus, organise and plan, and would likely become hyper vigilant of their surroundings. Reference was made to a series of psychological studies that had been undertaken in relation to this, which looked at the impact of traumatic events on past experiences.

Members were informed that trauma initiated a 'fight or flight' response. In schools, this could result in behaviour being viewed as disruptive or challenging, when in fact it could be reflective of a child's unmet need, anxiety, frustration or other.

The panel heard that PROCLAIM was a programme for the whole school; originally it was intended for Looked After Children, but this was later deemed too narrow as the output could be beneficial for all children. Work in schools was to help staff understand the interrelated experience of attachment and trauma, and that positive relationships could provide a healing process. It was indicated that some staff had already developed a very good understanding of this; however younger teachers may not have received training during their early professional development. It was felt imperative to develop staff understanding, with the intention that all or most schools would have started the journey to becoming more attachment aware and trauma informed by 2025; a three-year programme would be set for each school.

It was explained to Members that PROCLAIM was for learning and behaviour; the following points were made:

- Individuals learnt best when secure relationships created the safety that helped them to take on the challenge of learning new things with confidence.
- High expectations for behaviour were achieved through relationship-based responses, for example:
 - We noticed children doing well.
 - We helped children learn to self-regulate by our own self-regulation.
 - We reflected on the impact of our behaviour on others.
 - We repaired relationship and damage we have may have caused.

The panel was informed that PROCLAIM provided security, safety and confidence in the classroom; getting things wrong was part of the learning process. It was about changing the narrative around young people, whilst concurrently setting boundaries and firm expectations with them, and dealing with difficult issues in new and different ways.

In terms of the impact of the PROCLAIM programme to date, the panel was provided with the following comparison data pertaining to the 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 academic years:

- For the 2021/2022 academic year, there were 238 suspensions, for 440 days, by 60 children. For the 2022/2023 academic year, there were 158 suspensions, for 308 days, by 49 children.
- There had been a 33.6% reduction in the number of suspension episodes in 2022/2023 compared to 2021/2022.
- There had been a 30% reduction in the number of days suspended in 2022/2023 compared to 2021/2022.
- There had been an 18.3% reduction in the number of children suspended in 2022/2023 compared to 2021/2022.
- There had been a 40% reduction in the number of suspensions from PROCLAIM schools in 2022/2023 compared to 2021/2022 (there had been a 30.4% reduction in

the number of suspensions from non-PROCLAIM schools in 2022/2023 compared to 2021/2022).

- There had been a 40.5% reduction in the number of days suspended from PROCLAIM schools in 2022/2023 compared to 2021/2022 (there had been a 24.5% reduction in the number of days suspended from non-PROCLAIM schools in 2022/2023 compared to 2021/2022).
- There had been a 19% reduction in the number of children suspended from PROCLAIM schools in 2022/2023 compared to 2021/2022 (there had been a 15.4% reduction in the number of children suspended from non-PROCLAIM schools in 2022/2023 compared to 2021/2022).

	September 2021 - July 2022		September 2022 - July 2023	
	PROCLAIM Schools	Non - PROCLAIM Schools	PROCLAIM Schools	Non-PROCLAIM Schools
Suspension Episodes	80 (33.6%)	158 (66.4%)	48 (30.4%)	110 (69.6%)
Days Suspended	150.5 (34.2%)	289.5 (65.8%)	89.5 (29.1%)	218.5 (70.9%)
Children Suspended	21 (35%)	39 (65%)	17 (34%)	33 (66%)

In terms of the impact of the PROCLAIM programme on attendance, it was highlighted that encouraging signs of schools' involvement with it were being seen. The following details were provided to the panel:

- Children on Child Protection Plans had 13% better attendance in a PROCLAIM school than those children in the wider school population.
- Whole school attendance improved by 2% from 87% to 89%.
- Attendance by children on a Child Protection Plan had improved by 3% from 83% to 86%.
- Attendance by children on a Child in Need Plan had improved by 5% from 73% to 78%.
- Attendance of previously Looked After Children had improved by 6% from 71% to 77%.

It was highlighted to Members that there were many reasons to continue on with this work, with some very positive results being seen. Members were advised that further information regarding the programme was available upon request, with reference being made to a 20-minute film that had been produced.

The Chair thanked the Specialist Senior Educational Psychologist for the presentation and invited questions from the panel.

In response to a query, it was explained to Members that PROCLAIM was a Middlesbrough programme, and that thought to expanding this was currently being given. Further consideration as to how this would translate in practice, i.e. whether it could be sold to other Local Authorities or shared, was required.

A Member queried the number of schools currently involved with the programme. In response, the panel heard that in year one, ten schools had been involved. However, this had since increased to the current number of 26 establishments, across a range of settings, which included primary schools, secondary schools and further education colleges, the Inclusion Service, and Curve, which was a Cleveland Police project. It was intended that the number of participating organisations would increase further in September 2024. There was currently a good balance of secondary and primary schools; the ethos was about providing safe and

secure environments.

In response to a query regarding the issues that prevented some establishments from participating in PROCLAIM, it was indicated to Members that staff turnover had been a factor. Although some schools had not provided any reasoning for choosing not to get involved, it was noted that the programme had been made available to all schools, with representatives from each invited to launch events.

A Member queried the amount of work for Head Teachers in signing up to the PROCLAIM programme. In response, Members heard that there was a commitment, but this was more time based as opposed to financial. There was no financial cost to any establishment signing up to PROCLAIM, as it was funded through the Virtual School's Pupil Premium. However, schools did need to fully commit. This involved attendance at training days, workshops and half-termly meetings, and schools were also asked to provide data around attendance, suspension and attainment.

A Member made reference to the issue of trauma and queried data around it. In response, it was explained that trauma was a series of events, or an event, where a relationship had been impacted and which had affected emotional awareness and practicing skills. The impact of trauma was spectrum based and different for everyone.

The Member subsequently enquired about the success of the programme to date and was informed, in response, that the first cohort was in September 2022; the second cohort in September 2023; and the third cohort would participate from September 2024. Work was currently taking place with other Local Authorities and research partners to determine outcomes, but due to the infancy of the programme, data was limited. Further analysis would be undertaken in due course.

Members discussed the importance of a whole school approach to ensure that all followed the same practice. It was indicated to the panel that some schools had embedded the practicalities easier than others, with some requiring additional support to discuss barriers, staff turnover and the role of Senior Leadership Teams.

The Attendance Manager introduced herself to the panel and provided information to Members regarding the Education Welfare Service, which was a statutory service.

The panel was advised that in April 2013, the Local Authority's team of Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) was disbanded, with funding being devolved to schools for them to procure their own attendance support services.

The Education Welfare Service continued to deliver the Local Authority's statutory functions relating to attendance, i.e., Legal Interventions, using the full range of parental responsibility measures where voluntary support had not been successful or engaged with.

Referrals received into the service from schools were accessed to ensure support had been offered or attempted by school in relation to identified issues impacting on attendance, prior to the decision being made to issue Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) or prepare a prosecution file.

The following statistics identifying the number of FPNs and Prosecutions for the last three years were provided:

Post Covid	FPNs Issued	Prosecutions
2021/22	904	287
2022/23	2026	577
2023 to date (8 April 2024)	1081	455

Members were informed that the Department for Education (DfE) was supporting Middlesbrough in its effort to raise school attendance across the town. As part of this support, funding had been provided to recruit a team of EWOs on a temporary basis. The Local Authority had found it particularly challenging to source staffing with the experience and necessary skill set required for these roles, and it had been recognised that schools also faced the same issues recruiting in this area.

The Local Authority currently had four EWOs in post since recruiting to post in January and

February 2024. A further three posts, one being Special Educational Needs (SEN) Focused, were being re-advertised due to applicants accepting a position and then withdrawing very close to the proposed start date. One officer had worked her notice after commencing with the Local Authority in January 2024, having sourced permanent employment within a Middlesbrough secondary school.

The EWOs were receiving a thorough induction, equipping them with the skills and knowledge to be confident in fulfilling their role. Schools had been extremely supportive during the EWOs induction and continued to be, allowing newly appointed officers to spend a substantial amount of time in schools shadowing their attendance teams, identifying cohorts, accompanying on home visits, and sitting in on Attendance Case Conferences. The Education Welfare Service greatly appreciated this support. Three EWOs were now at the stage of accepting attendance referrals from schools to manage their own caseload under supervision.

The Local Authority's Early Help team had also played a significant role in the induction process by arranging for EWOs to shadow their staff. Not only was this an excellent opportunity to gain valuable experience and knowledge, but strengthened working relationships by developing a multi-agency approach when attendance issues were identified as a factor in family support casework.

The proposed allocation model for the DfE's EWO support was provided to Members, as follows:

- Three secondary schools with lowest attendance - three days per week.
- Five secondary schools remaining - one day per week.
- Ten primary schools with lowest attendance - one day per week.
- Thirty-one primary schools remaining - one day per term.

Special schools would have a dedicated EWO, whereas independent schools would be offered targeted support meetings.

The panel was advised that, in line with DfE 'Working Together to Improve School Attendance' statutory guidance, published in February 2024, the Local Authority was currently implementing targeted support meetings in schools, which would strengthen relationships and facilitate collaborative working. These face-to-face focussed meetings would identify cases where out of school barriers to attendance may have existed, and which therefore required a coordinated multi-agency approach. The Education Welfare Service would continue to strengthen the working partnership with Early Help to allow multi-agency whole-family support to tackle identified issues impacting on attendance.

With regards to data sharing, Members heard that up-to-date attendance data had recently become available to access via the DfE's 'Monitor Your School Attendance' service. This ensured an accurate view on attendance for all schools and all cohorts, which could be shared widely with partners and used to identify best practice and area wide barriers. It was felt that access to live data, for the first time, would have a significantly positive impact on attendance data.

The panel noted that from September 2024, all schools would have a named officer to approach for advice and guidance. The service would continue to hold networks and drop-ins for school attendance staff to share good practice, and bring forward any emerging issues that the service and its colleagues could support with.

The Chair thanked the Attendance Manager for the information and invited questions from the panel.

In response to a query regarding current attendance levels at schools in Middlesbrough, Members were advised of the following:

- Secondary schools – 89%.
- Primary schools – 94.1%.
- Special schools – 87.7%.
- Overall attendance – 91.8%, which placed Middlesbrough at second bottom in the country.

A short discussion ensued in relation to the potential reasoning for this. Members acknowledged that there was no one clear determining factor for absenteeism - there were varying factors at play. The issue was a national one, was incredibly complex and not easy to address. Members discussed the impact that Covid had had on school attendance, with issues such as parental anxiety being passed to their children, which in turn had impacted youngsters' mental health. In some cases, parents did not simply recognise the value of education and consequently did not force their children to attend school. In these scenarios, it was explained to the panel that the Local Authority would contact the family to undertake an initial assessment. This would determine next steps in terms of necessary support. Some families would refuse an initial assessment; non-compliance would lead to prosecution. Not every case was a quick win and was a complicated process. It was indicated that three custodial sentences had been handed to parents in Middlesbrough; parents sentenced to 12-weeks in prison whilst children were taken into care. The Attendance Manager provided details of a case study of one of the custodial prosecution cases, which evidently had had a very positive outcome by way of the parent completely changing their life around.

In response to a query regarding the targeting of support for low attendance, Members were advised that the three lowest performing schools had been approached.

A Member queried the reasoning as to why the EWO posts were temporary, given the importance of attendance at school. In response, it was explained that the roles were DfE funded for a period of one year. This could potentially be extended, but it would depend on the performance and outcome of year one. Further discussion around the complexity of the issues facing Middlesbrough that contributed to absenteeism was held, which included: significant levels of deprivation; Looked After Children figures being double to other areas; and poor generational attitudes towards education. However, it was again acknowledged that poor school attendance affected many areas nationally and was not solely applicable to Middlesbrough. It was a continuous challenge to address low attendance and improve performance, and therefore important to acknowledge the excellent work being undertaken by schools and EWOs in supporting this.

A discussion ensued in relation to FPN fines. Members heard that the amounts charged followed a national framework and would be increasing in the autumn. Depending upon how quickly fines were paid, and whether there were any previous offences, would determine the amount payable, or whether the case would be expediated immediately to court. The panel discussed school holidays and children being taken out of school during term time for financial reasons. It was indicated that parents in affluent households also carried out this practice, though there were no statistics currently available relating to this. It was highlighted to Members that the decision as to whether children could be excused during term time remained at the discretion of Head Teachers; some schools in Middlesbrough fined for absence of five days or more, whereas others did not.

The EWO in attendance at the meeting addressed the panel. Information regarding the EWO's previous work experience, together with details of the EWO role and the activities undertaken were provided. Members thanked the EWO for sharing details of those experiences and providing information around the protocols in place for staff.

The panel discussed the role of the Early Help team and its significance in providing early support to families, such as signposting and referring to monetary advice services. Reference was also made to the role of other agencies as part of the Middlesbrough Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH), where referrals were triaged and forwarded to appropriate support services. A Member queried the role of community groups and organisations in assisting with this Early Help process. In response, it was explained that some community groups had assisted previously, whereas some had not become involved. It was felt to be a very good service with good connections and would hopefully continue to develop. Consideration was given to the promotion of the Early Help service, with suggestions being made for it to be publicised through the Council's website and social media channels, dependent upon existing arrangements and strategies.

The Chair thanked all of the representatives for their attendance and contributions to the meeting. As this was the final meeting of the current Municipal Year, the Chair thanked Members for their dedication over the last year and explained that the next stages for the review would be picked up in the new Municipal Year, as appropriate.

NOTED

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

None.