

PEOPLE SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the People Scrutiny Panel was held on Monday, 20 January 2025.

PRESENT: Councillors E Clynch (Chair), D Jackson, T Mohan, S Platt, S Tranter, Z Uddin and G Wilson.

OFFICERS: V Banks, C Cannon, T Dunn, L Grabham, R Jenkins, C Jones, C Lunn and J Tynan.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors J Banks, M McClintock, M Nugent and L Young.

24/48 WELCOME AND FIRE EVACUATION PROCEDURES

The Chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting and explained the fire evacuation procedures.

24/49 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

| Name of Member | Type of Interest | Item / Nature of Business |
|----------------|------------------|------------------------------------|
| Cllr E Clynch | Non-Pecuniary | Employed within education setting. |
| Cllr D Jackson | Non-Pecuniary | School Governor. |
| Cllr S Tranter | Non-Pecuniary | Employed within education setting. |

24/50 MINUTES - PEOPLE SCRUTINY PANEL - 16 DECEMBER 2024

The minutes of the People Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 16 December 2024 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

24/51 CHILDREN MISSING FROM EDUCATION (CME) - FURTHER EVIDENCE

The Head of Virtual School was in attendance to present further evidence for the scrutiny topic of Children Missing Education (CME), specifically around Looked After Children and the role of the Virtual School.

The role of the Local Authority Head of Virtual School was to promote the educational achievement of children in care and children previously in care. This included children with a Social Worker and from September 2024, children in kinship care. The Head of Virtual School worked closely with Schools, Social Workers and other professionals to share information and ensured that all parties were aware of the child's educational needs and progress.

The post played a crucial function in tracking and monitoring the educational progress of children in care and assisted with attendance monitoring, Personal Education Plans (PEPs) and the tracking of attainment and progress.

According to a report by the Children's Commissioner, as of March 2022, there were approximately 1,363 looked after children (2.7%) who were not in school. This included children who were not registered at any school and were not receiving suitable education otherwise. By Local Authority, this varied from 0% to 13.4%.

National Challenges found by the Children's Commissioner were as follows:

- Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) Delays: Delays in transferring EHCPs when children were placed out of area. School Capacity: Schools often lacked capacity or expertise to support children with SEN.
- Unregistered Education: Some children received education from unregistered settings, posing risks to their education and safety.
- Structural Factors: Placement type, stability, and location of care placement affected school attendance.

The local context of Looked After Children (LAC) missing from education was presented. There were currently 14 (3.5%) LAC missing from education, 10 (71%) had an EHCP and 4 (29%) had SEND support. A trend analysis showed that LAC missing from education had risen from 4 (1% of the cohort) in September 2023 to 14 (3.5%) in December 2024, peaking at 8 (8%) in July 2024.

During discussion, a member queried the contributory factors of the increase in LAC missing from education. The Head of Virtual School advised that there was a difficulty in finding school places for SEN; an instability in places and insufficiency nationally had driven the increase in numbers.

The Chair reminded the Panel that Headteachers had been contacted to ascertain their views on how CME affected their schools and if there was any specific support or improvements that could be identified. The Chair welcomed the Vice Principal of Outwood Academy, Ormesby who had responded to the request and was in attendance at the meeting.

The Vice Principal introduced himself and stated that CME in East Middlesbrough was a significant challenge for Outwood Academy, Ormesby. He advised that the school made referrals to the Council in respect of CME but due to strict criteria of the Local Authority, lots of cases were 'bounced back' and regarded as attendance issues. He further advised that schools chased non-attendance rigorously and were monitored by Ofsted on their attendance figures; the school had their own Attendance Officers and Safeguarding Officers.

The Vice Principal further advised that, in his opinion, an increase in elective home education had meant that the numbers of CME had risen, and that the Council's process had not caught up. The recent Children's Wellbeing in Schools Bill passed at Parliament would see the implementation of a single unique identifier for children, which should assist in tracking children and assist in resolving these issues.

A Member referred to the growing trend of parents choosing to home educate their children and asked the Vice Principal for his thoughts on this. The Vice Principal stated that the SEND crisis had had an impact and also, prosecuting parents for their children's non-attendance at school could be avoided by choosing to home educate.

A Member asked the Vice Principal on what additional assistance the Council could offer to support schools with CME. The Vice Principal stated that this was a national problem, but Middlesbrough's deep-entrenched issue of poverty simply magnified the issues. It was stated that further family support workers would be beneficial and that the Early Help model in Middlesbrough could be improved. The SEND system was simply a 'make-do model' with not enough resource and although Priory Woods was outstanding, it was imagined there was a huge waiting list for such a facility. The town had an issue with permanent exclusions, but when schools sought help from the Council, it was not received due to of lack of resource.

The Executive Director of Children's Services noted the comments from the Vice Principal and stated that he believed the Early Help service was strong and robust, as noted by Ofsted. The Head of SEN and Vulnerable Learners further advised that there were significant pressures of SEND nationally. The Middlesbrough SEND Inspection by Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (CQC) in October 2023 resulted in the highest outcome, despite the local challenges. The numbers of children in Elective Home Education had risen nationally and was an area for further review.

The Head of Access to Education and Alternative Provision advised that there were around 272 EHE children in Middlesbrough, a significant upward trend in comparison to the figure of 120, two years ago. Schools were encouraged to take attendance seriously, yet the more pressure placed on parents, the more likely they were to remove children from school and place them into home education.

The Chair thanked the Vice Principal of Outwood Academy, Ormesby for his attendance and contribution to the meeting. The Panel discussed obtaining views on the topic from more schools and the Chair advised that further contact would be made with Headteachers to request this.

NOTED

24/52 HOMELESSNESS - AN INTRODUCTION

The Access and Change Together (ACT) Middlesbrough Lead Officer was in attendance to provide an overview on the scrutiny topic, Homelessness.

The presentation included:

- Homelessness Legislation.
- Duties introduced in the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2017.
- Eligibility for Homelessness assistance.
- Definitions of Homelessness.
- Emergency / Interim Accommodation Duty.
- Priority Need.
- Vulnerability.
- Intentionally Homeless.
- Local Connection.
- National and Local statistics.
- Social Housing and Private Rented Sector Challenges.
- Improvements to Service Delivery.

The Chair advised Members that, in advance of the next meeting, consideration should be given to the Terms of Reference that Members would like to explore for the scrutiny investigation of Homelessness.

NOTED

24/53 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

The Chair provided an update on items discussed at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 18 December 2024, which included:

- Corporate Performance: Quarter Two 2024/25.
- Executive Member Update – Finance.
- 2024/25 Quarter Two Revenue and Capital Monitoring and Forecast Outturn.
- 2025/26 Draft Budget and MTFP 2025/26 and 2028/29.
- Executive Forward Work Programme.
- Forward Plan Information Updates: Capex – Municipal Buildings Roof Repairs.
- Scrutiny Chairs Update.

NOTED

24/54 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING - 17 FEBRUARY 2025 AT 4.30 P.M.

The next meeting of the People Scrutiny Panel had been scheduled for Monday, 17 February 2025 at 4.30 p.m. in the Mandela Room, Town Hall.

NOTED

24/55 ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED.

None.