

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 18 January 2021.

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

OFFICERS: C Breheny, S Butcher, J Dixon, G Moore, B Robinson and J Rowan.

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillor High – Deputy Mayor and Lead Member for Children's Social Care.
Councillor Hellaoui – Chair of Corporate Parenting Board.

An APOLOGY for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor Higgins.

**** 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 7 December 2020 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

The Chair announced that the following two agenda items may be familiar to some Panel Members as they were recently presented to the Corporate Parenting Board, however, the Chair felt that it was beneficial for the information to be presented to the Scrutiny Panel in the context of the Panel's current scrutiny investigation.

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

J Rowan, Fostering Team Manager, was in attendance at the meeting to provide the Panel with further information in relation to its current scrutiny topic, focussing on foster carers in Middlesbrough.

The Panel was informed that the Fostering Service was required to provide an annual dataset to Ofsted in relation to foster carers and placements. The latest data showed that in quarter two of the 2020/21 financial year, Middlesbrough had 156 approved foster care households creating 263 placements. These figures had increased from quarter one – 149 foster carers with 243 placements. For 2019/20 the annual return figure was 141 foster carers and 261 placements. There had been a net increase of foster carers but not of fostering placements, therefore, it was crucial to utilise foster placements as effectively as possible.

A breakdown of the types of foster placements available was provided to the Panel and it was noted that in quarter two of 2020/21, of the 156 foster carers:-

- 89 - short term foster carers
- 38 – fully approved connected persons carers
- 17 - long term foster carers
- 11 – respite care
- 1 – fostering to adopt

There had been an increase of four short term foster carer approvals from quarter one and an increase of five approved connected persons carers from quarter one. There was a decrease of two long term carers during the same period. Work was ongoing to identify the resources needed to try to increase the number of short term foster carers.

In terms of the number of foster carers that were approved, Members were informed that a total of 41 foster carers were approved during 2019/20 (22 mainstream and 19 connected persons). During quarter one of 2020/21, a total of 10 foster carers were approved (five mainstream and five connected persons) and a total of 12 foster carers were approved during quarter two (five mainstream and seven connected persons).

In 2019/20, a total of 24 foster carers were de-registered – 16 mainstream carers and 8 connected persons carers. In 2020/21 during quarter one, a total of four carers were deregistered – two mainstream and two connected persons carers – and during quarter two connected persons carers were deregistered. The reasons for de-registration included retirement, health reasons and other work commitments. There had been initial concerns that some carers might be moving to Independent Fostering Agencies but it was confirmed that only one carer had moved to an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) since March 2020. However, three or four IFA carers had moved across to become carers with Middlesbrough Council, this was mainly due to improvement in practice. Middlesbrough had a good conversion rate in terms of turning initial enquiries into fully approved foster carers and also had a good rate of children in long term foster placements.

The Panel was advised that Children's Services was improving at better utilising in-house fostering placements with appropriate matching. In 2019/20, 163 children were placed with in-house foster carers. In 2020/21, 145 children were placed with in-house carers during quarter one and 174 children were placed with in-house carers during quarter two. As at quarter two there were 15 vacant places and this was also the average for 2019/20. In quarter two, 56 places were not available due to foster carers being on hold. This could be due to a variety of reasons including Covid, however, best efforts were being made to manage risk. On hold carers would be supported back into fostering if they wished to continue and the support offer included improved training and development, regular monthly consultation meetings and a foster carers Facebook page.

Of those places unavailable, a breakdown of the reasons was provided as follows:-

- Carer taking a break/pending resignation
- Needs of the child currently in placement
- Only available if sibling group placed
- Used by CYP Staying Put after turning 18

There were 18 carers taking a break/pending resignation as of quarter two in 2020/21 and reasons for this were broken down as follows:-

- 7 – personal/health reasons
- 2 – pending resignation
- 2 – investigation into standard of care provided.
- 2 – post adoption (foster carers that had gone on to adopt).
- 2 – fully approved as connected persons carers (to be closed). (Once relevant legal orders had been granted it took a period of 28 days for them to be deregistered).
- 3 – updated assessment required (this linked to standards of care, where information obtained in relation to the carers required a further assessment to be undertaken before children could be placed).

29 placements were not available due to the needs of the child currently in place, therefore, it was important to ensure that matching was appropriate so that the child's needs were the priority and that the ability of foster carers was carefully considered.

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

- It was queried whether feedback was recorded from foster carers leaving the service in an attempt to identify any common themes. It was confirmed that feedback was sought on the carers' experience as a whole through a satisfaction survey. The survey was being developed further for use with all carers throughout the year, rather than using only at the point they left

the service. This would help to focus attention on support and communications.

- Reference was made to the seven carers currently not available to provide placements as they provided sibling only placements and it was queried whether they would be likely to take a single child placement if needed. Clarification was provided regarding registration approval and it was highlighted that, for example, a foster carer(s) may be approved to care for two children or three children if they were siblings. This was usually due to the fact that 'single' children were required to have their own bedroom, but a sibling group of two could share a bedroom (if appropriate). The Service tried to keep those foster carers that were able to care for more than one child to take placements of related siblings although this was not always possible, but it was part of the matching considerations when placing children.
- In response to a query as to whether any gaps in fostering provision could be/had been identified, the Panel was informed that the key areas were:-
 - Parent and child placements – A foster care couple had recently transferred to Middlesbrough from an IFA and were experienced in providing parent and child placements and would be supporting the fostering service to develop this area of expertise. The couple would be speaking to the foster carer consultation group in February about their role in more detail and the service would consider the types of support required to develop those skills. It was hoped that three or four specialist parent and child placements could be created with their own support network.
 - Sibling group placements – this was an area where more foster carers were needed and this was being focussed upon as part of the fostering recruitment campaign. There was currently a light-touch campaign ongoing. Covid had impacted on recruitment nationally.
 - Teenage (11 plus) placements – this was also an area for further development and work was ongoing with Futures for Families.
- In response to a query, it was clarified that the numbers referred to in relation to placements that were not available related to the number of fostering households that were unable to offer a placement and not to the total number of placements that were unavailable, however, the Fostering Team Manager agreed to obtain this information for the Panel.

In relation to recruitment, the Panel was informed that in 2019/20, 123 initial enquiries were made in relation to fostering. In 2020/21, quarter one, 12 initial enquiries were made and 19 initial enquiries were made in quarter two. In response to a question, it was stated that the conversion rate from initial enquiry to the stage two assessment process was good in Middlesbrough and was usually around 20%. There was a steady rate of enquiries and these were comparable with IFAs. In terms of conversion rates for previous years it was highlighted that colleagues who had worked in other local authorities or with IFAs had stated their conversion rates to be 10% or less so Middlesbrough was performing well.

A Panel Member commented that we should not be aiming for a 100% conversion rate as not all enquirers would be suitable. It was queried whether the service was aware of how many initial enquiries were not progressed due to the fostering service considering them to be unsuitable. The Fostering Manager agreed to look into this and inform Panel Members of how many enquiries were progressed to stage two.

In terms of recruitment, it was acknowledged that IFAs were at the forefront of recruitment strategies and the Fostering Service was trying to utilise practices that had been tried and tested, for example by using Google ads, various social media platforms and of course word of mouth which was a great way of bringing people into the fostering service.

The following issues were raised by Panel Members:-

- A Panel Member queried how foster carer preparation training was being managed during

Covid. The Panel was informed that virtual group training and induction skills for fostering, pathways in fostering were being provided. It was highlighted that both mainstream and connected persons foster carers needed to be provided with the same support and the service was trying to be as responsive as possible in terms of providing training at different times/days.

- Reference was made to working alongside North Yorkshire Council who shared good practice and provided support and it was queried whether they had provided feedback in relation to Middlesbrough's service. The Panel was advised that initial feedback was that Middlesbrough knew its own service well and knew what was required to improve and develop its staffing structure in order to implement its plans. Development of Middlesbrough's finance procedures and offer to foster carers, including training and development, was well underway. Policies and procedures were the main areas of focus. North Yorkshire was impressed with the progress Middlesbrough had made during the last nine months particularly in going from having a significant amount of unallocated to work to having no unallocated work. Staff also had more clarity and confidence around their roles.
- The Panel was encouraged to hear about the positive feedback and it was queried what assurances could be provided to the Panel that those areas would be constantly monitored and how this would be done. The Panel was assured that performance monitoring would be ongoing via monthly performance management clinics and regular supervision of staff and foster carers. A culture of high support and high challenge was being embedded into the service and it was important to have clear expectations of staff. Following the implementation of practice mainly through supervision of social workers, a positive impact was now being seen.

In terms of what was working well within the fostering service, the following was reported:-

- A more robust initial screening process had been developed. This encouraged greater and ongoing dialogue with fostering applicants early in the process. It was anticipated that this would reduce the number of initial home visits that did not progress to assessment stage.
- Plans had also been developed to streamline the initial enquiry process to reduce the time taken between initial enquiries and home visits.
- A foster carer recruitment campaign was underway with staff being encouraged to contribute to the planning and consultation with the Marketing Team. Meetings were held every two weeks with the Marketing Team.
- A team of Independent Social Workers had been recruited to complete Form F assessments to ensure any surge in demand as a result of the recruitment campaign could be met.
- There had been a reduction in the number of requests for connected persons foster carer assessments due to the greater scrutiny on the range of placements available for children. This had helped to alleviate pressure across the service.
- Supported Lodgings provision was being developed to ensure that potential providers were robustly assessed, and that subsequent supervision and monitoring was in line with mainstream foster carers. Supported lodgings places were for young people over the age of 18 that were at risk and still required support towards independence. It was essential to ensure providers had the right skills.

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

- A Member of the Panel made reference to the reduction in the number of connected persons foster carers assessments and queried the difference between a connected persons carer and a mainstream foster carer and any issues that had been identified. It was explained that the main difference was that connected persons carers had some level of personal connection, usually a family member, to the child, and mainstream foster carers had no prior to connection to the child. The support offer should be the same for connected persons carers as for

mainstream carers and all carers were offered the same level of training and development standards, induction and supervision in line with their needs.

- A Panel Member asked what the difference was between staying put and supported lodgings. It was explained that when a young person was already in a foster care placement and reached the age of 18 and remained with the same fostering household, this became a Staying Put arrangement. Supported Lodgings was when a young person needed support but did not want to remain within the foster care household and was more of a semi-independent placement.
- In response to a question regarding training expectations for connected persons carers, it was explained that the service was transparent about its expectations in terms of training for all foster carers and support was provided accordingly. Development of the training offer was currently underway to look at providing training at different times of the day and weekends, one to one training etc to be more responsive to people's needs. It also needed to be acknowledged that connected persons carers had had their lives turned upside down as they had taken additional children into their homes, and had been assessed and become involved with social services and required support throughout the process from the point of temporary approval.
- A Panel Member made reference to the Pathways (Leaving Care) Team and asked about the current staffing levels. It was acknowledged that there had been an issue with staffing levels within the team and caseloads. Ofsted had found the caseload numbers of personal advisors as being too high (approximately 36 at the time of inspection), and some staff had left or moved teams. A member of staff was due to return from maternity leave which would bring staffing levels back to an adequate level.
- It was queried whether there was an age limit in relation to foster carers. It was confirmed that there was no age limit and that potential carers were assessed on their individual suitability and skills.
- A Member asked whether any specific work was being undertaken to recruit BAME foster carers and whether there were children who were waiting to be matched specifically to BAME groups. It was acknowledged that it could be challenging to specifically match children culturally, however, a number of carers had expressed an interest in learning more about different faiths and cultures and the service was looking to involve a diverse range of foster carers in its marketing campaign.
- A Member commented that a BAME foster carer was working with Adoption Tees Valley to encourage recruitment from minority groups.
- In response to a query as to whether Middlesbrough had foster carers that specifically provided placements for children with disabilities and complex health needs, it was explained that the service would look at the child's individual needs and use a strength-based approach to supporting the child and mainstream foster care placement as there were currently no carers with that specialism.

It was confirmed that there were no further questions and the Chair thanked the Officer for her attendance and the information provided.

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

SUFFICIENCY AND PERMANENCY (PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN CARE – FURTHER INFORMATION - CORPORATE PARENTING STRATEGY

B Robinson, Children's Services Programme Manager, was in attendance to provide the Panel with an overview of Middlesbrough's Corporate Parenting Strategy. A copy of the document in its entirety had been circulated to Panel Members and a presentation was given, highlighting the

headlines from the Strategy.

The Corporate Parenting Strategy had been developed in consultation with staff, partners, Members and young people, as part of the improvement journey of Children's Services. The Strategy set out Middlesbrough's vision and actions to support children and young people in the authority's care.

The Strategy encompassed a Permanency Strategy and a Sufficiency Strategy. The Permanency Strategy set out how the authority would strengthen its quality of practice to ensure positive outcomes for children and young people in its care and the Sufficiency Strategy set out how the authority would commission high quality support, placements and learning that met the needs of the children and young people in its care.

The guiding principles of the Strategy were developed directly from the consultation work with care experienced young people and care leavers and they had made short videos to accompany each of the principles:-

- 'Our Home' – A stable and secure home arrangement that meets our needs and wishes.
- 'Our Friends and Family' – Contact with all the people that are important to us in our lives.
- 'Our Education and Employment' – Excellent support to access the education, training and employment that we need.
- 'Our Health and Wellbeing' – Easy access to specialist support for our emotional and mental health and wellbeing.
- 'Our Adult Life' – Support to leave care when we are ready and to make a positive transition to adult life.
- 'Our Voice and Influence' – Being listened to, having a real voice and opportunities to shape and influence the plans for our care.
- 'Our Needs and Wishes' – The starting point for planning for permanency with children, young people and their families.

The Panel was advised that at the beginning of compiling the Strategy, there were some things that were already going well/started to improve within Children's Services, for example:-

- Placements were more stable and there was a steady reduction in the proportion of children who had experienced three or more placement moves whilst in our care.
- Reduction in drift and delay for children in our care, supported by a targeted focus from Futures for Families and the Innovate projects.
- More children were being supported to attend school regularly, with a reduction in fixed term exclusions, leading to a more stable and effective learning experience.
- Visits and contacts to children in our care were increasingly within timescales, leading to an improved experience of care and support.

In terms of areas that required further improvement, the following had been identified:-

- Early identification of risk to support children on the edge of care.
- Quality and timeliness of permanence planning.
- Availability of sufficient and suitable local homes.
- Access to emotional and mental health support.
- Educational attainment for children in our care and employment and training outcomes for care leavers.
- Robust oversight from Independent Reviewing Officers.
- Better decision making on placements and resources.
- Systematic dental and health checks for children in our care.

The Panel was provided with information in relation to trends and demands in Middlesbrough and it was highlighted that this information had been presented to the Corporate Parenting Board to support the sign off of the Strategy.

Members were informed that as at the end of October 2020:-

- The numbers of children in our care had increased by 89% over five years. This exceeded local and national trends.
- In recent months the numbers of children in our care had started to gradually reduce. The Panel was updated that the numbers of children looked after had reduced from 702 in July 2020 to 629 to date. This was due to focussed improvement work that was ongoing and was very encouraging.
- There had been a significant recent improvement in the balance between young people entering care and those leaving care, however, children were still spending too long in care and action was being taken to improve permanency practice.
- As practice was being improved, reinvestment in resources was being made to reduce drift and delay and to support children on the edge of care.

The Panel was advised that, having looked at the evidence, the six key priorities were identified as follows and the detailed action plans being delivered by staff were structured around the principles:-

- Prevention and Edge of Care
- Sufficient and Stable Placements
- Voice, Participation and Influence
- Education, Employment, Health and Wellbeing
- Permanency Planning
- Managing Demand and Maximising Resources for Children in our Care

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

- The Chair commented that he had spoken to some foster carers who had approached him for advice. He had shared the Corporate Parenting Strategy with them and provided their feedback. One carer had queried "what do they (local authority) intend to do and what does it mean when the Strategy states 'robust and innovative multi-agency wrap-around support for foster carers to support vulnerable and high risk placements'?" The Executive Director clarified that this referred to Futures for Families working to support children and families on the edge of care and fragile placements together with the Innovate Team. The multi-agency element referred to the differently skilled practitioners within Futures for Families. It was acknowledged that not every foster carer would have experienced this multi-agency approach as Futures for Families only went live in September and foster carers with stable placements would not have required this type of support.
- A Member commented that it might be useful to receive occasional feedback, from foster carers, in relation to the multi-agency approach to demonstrate the impact it was having. It was queried whether specific training for vulnerable placements was provided, such as how to deal with challenging behaviours, and adolescence, and to build up a bank of knowledge and good practice that could be shared between carers. The Executive Director stated that good practice did exist and that it may be worth hearing from Futures for Families skilled practitioners to provide anonymised examples of the work that they are doing and those practitioners would be looking to share their skills to upskill social work teams.
- The Chair advised that another Middlesbrough Foster Carer had commented on access to specialist and mental health support as follows: "The Strategy states 'swift access to specialist support when needed, swift access to mental health support services and therapies when needed and easy access to specialist support when needed', at no point was access swift. We

waited four months for play therapy for the child in our care (who was paying was the issue) more than a year back and forth with CAMHS who quoted they had no budget to help children in care. What timescale is considered swift?" The Chair stated that the foster carer had asked for help and how could we respond to this. It was acknowledged that the Strategy was new and that Social Work practice had needed to improve over the last year from a low base. The Executive Director understood and acknowledged the comments of the foster carer in that the wait for specialist services had been too long and discussion was ongoing to rectify this. Spotlight sessions were held at the end of each Improvement Board meeting, where services were held to account, and TEWV CAMHS would be accountable at the next meeting. The CAMHS Service had been clear that they had no specific resources for looked after children and the previous resource had been dissipated. Other agencies could not be directed by the local authority but could be influenced and relationships were improving.

- Reference was made to the 89% increase in the number of children becoming looked after in Middlesbrough over the last five years and it was queried whether the budget had also increased during that time. The Executive Director responded that it was well-known that the primary cost from the children's care budget was external residential placements. There had been 74 children in expensive external provision and it was acknowledged that some of those young people would have been placed in such a placement as it best met their needs. A foster care placement with an IFA would cost in the region of £800 per week compared to an external residential placement costing between £5,000 - £8,000 per week. As previously discussed with the Panel, work was ongoing to move as many children as possible out of external residential placements where it was safe and appropriate to do so and such placement moves were being made because of need not cost. As the numbers of looked after placements had decreased so had the numbers of children in expensive external residential placements. External placements had previously been made too freely and any external placements now had to be authorised by the Executive Director. This was the principal reason why costs had increased but were now coming down.

The Chair thanked the Officer for his attendance and the information provided.

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

UPDATE – COVID RECOVERY – CHILDREN'S SERVICES

S Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services, was in attendance to provide the Panel with a verbal update on Covid recovery in Children's Services. It was explained that as part of the Children's Services Improvement Plan, it was considered that the work being undertaken by Children's Services during the Covid pandemic should be shared with Members of both Children's Scrutiny Panels and the Corporate Parenting Board. The Chair of the Panel agreed that this item would be placed on the agenda for each Panel meeting.

It was explained that Bronze, Silver and Gold meetings were held within the Council to look at issues across the service at operational and strategic levels during the Covid pandemic.

Members were aware that all schools were open to vulnerable children and children of key workers. A vulnerable child was defined as being a child with an allocated Social Worker and the attendance of vulnerable children in school was monitored. A dedicated telephone line had been established for schools to inform the Council when a vulnerable child was not in school. This notification would trigger a risk assessment to determine whether action was required.

When vulnerable children were found not to be in school, systems were in place to track where they were, ensure their safety and to facilitate remote learning. It was recognised that head teachers were under immense pressure as they were essentially managing two schools - a remote school and an actual school. The Council held regular meetings with schools to support head teachers and staff. It had been identified that schools within Middlesbrough required approximately 700 additional laptops/devices to ensure all children had access to remote learning.

The Council was liaising with the DfE and had already distributed thousands of laptops across Middlesbrough, focussing on those pupils that were most vulnerable and disadvantaged. In addition, schools, private businesses and voluntary organisations had also been accessing their budgets and working to provide devices to pupils. The Council aimed to track the distribution of laptops and ensure that schools received the number of laptops they had requested and it was noted that demand varied from school to school.

In relation to staffing within Children's Services, Members were advised that staff were all working from home in line with current Government advice. It was acknowledged that this could be isolating, particularly for newly qualified Social Workers who would usually learn from working alongside more experienced Social Workers, however, support was available to staff and the Executive Director held a weekly virtual briefing to share information with staff.

In terms of Social Worker visits to children and families, including foster carers, recent guidance stated that visits should be face to face wherever possible and only virtual in exceptional circumstances. Precautions were taken by staff by phoning ahead of the visit to check that no-one in the household had Covid symptoms and appropriate PPE was worn. The primary aim was to ensure that children were safe and Children's Services was working with Public Health and CAMHS.

In response to a query it was confirmed that there were various reasons why a vulnerable child might not be in school, for example, the child or the foster carer may be clinically vulnerable and the child's learning needs may be best met by remaining at home and this would be looked at on a case by case basis.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

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 18 December 2020 and 14 January 2021, namely:-

18 December 2020 – Meeting 1

Call-In – Nunthorpe Grange Farm Disposal – adjourned and deferred due to technical issues.

18 December 2020 – Meeting w

Call-In – Residual Waste Collections – deferred due to technical issues.

14 January 2021

- Executive Forward Work Programme.
- Middlesbrough Council's Response to Covid-19 Response – Chief Executive & Director of Public Health.
- Executive Member update – Executive Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health (Councillor Davison).
- Strategic Plan and Quarter Two Outturn Report.
- Teesside Safeguarding Adults Board – Annual Report 2019/20 and Strategic Plan 2020/21.
- Final Report – Culture and Communities Scrutiny Panel – Social Cohesion and Integration.
- 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, 15 February 2021 at 4.00pm.

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

The Chair permitted a Member of the Panel to raise an issue under any other items in relation to a recent planning application considered at the Council's Planning and Development Committee.

A recent Planning Committee had considered a planning application from a private provider seeking planning approval for a children's residential home. The Panel Member considered that the Scrutiny Panel Members should be invited to Planning Committee when decisions relating to children's services were being made and that Planning Committee Members should be provided with training around such issues to ensure understanding of the issues and to take a non-judgemental approach.

The Chair stated that as Chair of the Scrutiny Panel and as a Member of the Planning Committee he had ensured that a balanced view on behalf of the Panel was brought to the discussion in the Planning Committee.

A Panel Member expressed concern around what procedures and processes were currently in place to ensure the quality of care and standards of care provided by private care home providers as this was not a planning consideration.

In response to a query, clarification was provided by the Executive Director that Middlesbrough's Children's Services very rarely used independent residential provision in Middlesbrough as it had its own residential provision, however, children could be placed from anywhere in the country in such residential homes.

It was suggested that further discussion outside of the Scrutiny arena could be held to further understand the practice in relation to the delivery of such models and that the Scrutiny Panel may wish examine the issue.

NOTED