

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Panel was held on Tuesday, 24 June 2025.

PRESENT: Councillors E Clynch (Chair), B Hubbard (in attendance as Substitute for Councillor Wilson), D Jackson, J McTigue, M Nugent and Z Uddin.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: D Hodgson (Local Democracy Reporter).

OFFICERS: C Cannon, L Cook, C Jones and C Lunn.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors A Romaine, S Tranter and G Wilson.

25/25 **WELCOME AND FIRE EVACUATION PROCEDURE**

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

25/26 **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.

25/27 **OVERVIEW OF SERVICE AREAS**

The Interim Director for Education and Partnerships and the Head of Safeguarding, Care Planning and Children with Disabilities were in attendance to provide Members with an overview of the services delivered across their directorates, and to highlight the strategic and departmental priorities for the coming year.

The officers each delivered a presentation, both of which focused on the following topics:

- A list of service areas within the directorate, together with a brief description of the work of each service area.
- Priorities.
- Current projects.
- Challenges.
- Corporate Performance Measures.

The Interim Director for Education and Partnerships explained that the service was large and comprised a variety of areas within it. These were: Access to Education; Achievement; Inclusion and Specialist Support Services; and Youth Justice Team. Members were provided with a brief description of the work these services carried out.

In terms of priorities for the year ahead, these were outlined as follows:

- Reduce the number of permanent exclusions and suspensions across the town.
- Ensure sufficiency of school places for all children and young people.
- Improve attendance for all children and young people.
- Monitor the number of children choosing Elective Home Education (EHE).
- Increase inclusion within mainstream settings for children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).
- Ensure EHCPs were completed within the 20-week statutory timescale.
- Support schools and settings to have a skilled workforce.
- Reduce the number of children and young people accessing out of area specialist

- provision.
- Reduce the deficit on the High Needs Budget.
- Improve outcomes for all children and young people.

Details of several projects currently being undertaken were provided to the Panel, as follows:

- SHiFT Middlesbrough.
- Adopting a digital support system that embraced, Education, Early Help and Social Care.
- Improving Attendance.
- Introduction of a new Resource Allocation System to support children with an EHCP.
- Review of specialist provision.
- Family Hubs.

Challenges facing the service this year were outlined to Members, as follows:

- Exclusions and suspensions.
- Funding.
- Sufficiency of Alternative Provision (AP) placements.
- Sufficiency of Specialist Placements.
- Attendance.
- The increasing number of EHE children.

A number of Corporate Performance Measures were outlined to the Panel, as follows:

- Permanent exclusions: Currently 88, which was slightly lower than the previous year.
- Suspensions: Reduction in the days lost per pupil, suspensions rates were slowing.
- Attendance: 92.5%.
- EHE - currently 321.
- Completion of an EHCP within 20-weeks - 97%. Comparatively, the figure was 50% nationally.
- Inclusion within mainstream settings for children with an EHCP - 39.2%.
- Children currently accessing AP - 377.

During the discussion that followed, a Member referred to EHE and queried the qualifications needed to educate children at home. In response, the Panel was advised that parents were not required to have any formal qualifications, but they would be required to follow the national curriculum. There were various reasons why parents opted to home educate their children; unannounced visits were carried out to ensure that this was being undertaken appropriately.

A Member referred to the Youth Justice System and queried the age group that the service supported. In response, it was explained that this was primary age upwards, though predominantly concerned older children and teenagers. Officers regularly visited secondary schools to undertake different preventative activities with children.

In response to a query regarding EHCPs, Members heard that children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) may have required a support plan. If a range of support was needed, an assessment would be carried out: there was a 20-week statutory process in place for this. Information was available on the Local Offer pages of the Council's website, but additional training could be arranged for the Panel Members, if required. This would be added to the list of suggestions for the Panel's work programme, in preparation for consideration at the next meeting.

A Member referred to Government funding and queried the impact that this was having on Children's Services; it was suggested that regular financial updates be provided to the Panel going forward. In response, Members were informed that although funding had provided for various activities, which had had a positive impact on the lives of young people, this was insufficient and consequently there was currently a deficit. Financial information/updates could be provided, but the Panel would need to be clear about the type of data they wished to receive. This would be added to the list of suggestions for the Panel's work programme, in preparation for consideration at the next meeting.

A Member asked how many young people were currently enrolled on the SHiFT programme and how successful it had been for them. In response, it was explained that 27 young people were currently involved and the programme was having a positive impact on their lives.

A Member referred to the excluded children and the provision made available for them. In response, it was explained that there was a range of AP in Middlesbrough. Reference was made to the Multi-Academy Trust that encompassed three schools and had received a very good report from OFSTED. Other provision was also available; placement was based on the needs of the child. In response to a subsequent enquiry regarding academies, Members were informed that all eight of the secondary schools in Middlesbrough were academies, which were governed by their own processes. A small number of the primary schools in Middlesbrough were maintained by the Local Authority, but the majority were also academised. An Education Alliance Board was in place to drive forward improvements for children/families; pupil funding was provided to the individual schools and not the Local Authority.

In response to a query regarding the impact of the pandemic, Members were advised that some children continued to feel anxiety around attending school, particularly those of primary school age.

Regarding the service area's priorities, specifically the aim to reduce the number of children and young people accessing out of area specialist provision, a Member felt that it would be useful for the Panel to receive a separate report on that issue. This would be added to the list of suggestions for the Panel's work programme, in preparation for consideration at the next meeting.

A Member referred to the improving attendance project and queried whether this referred to improvements at both primary and secondary level. In response, it was confirmed that it did. Attendance was actively monitored, and work undertaken with schools to try and improve it.

In relation to suspensions and permanent exclusions, a Member asked whether this predominantly referred to primary or secondary schools, or both. In response, it was indicated that there had not been any permanent exclusions from any primary school – all were from secondary schools. To date, 88 pupils had been excluded this academic year – the figure was expected to rise to around 117 by the end of it. A Member queried whether a breakdown of these by school could be provided. In response, it was explained that although specific schools could not be named, statistics could be provided at a later date, if requested.

The Head of Safeguarding, Care Planning and Children with Disabilities explained that the following service areas sat within Children's Care: Early Help; the Multi Agency Children's Hub (MACH); Assessment Service; Safeguarding and Care Planning; Children with Disabilities Service; Children in the authority's care/Pathways; Aspire/Harm Outside of the Home (HOTH); and Residential Services. Members were provided with a brief description of the work these services carried out.

Regarding priorities for the service, these were outlined as follows:

- Practice/performance improvement.
- Implementation of a practice model - Signs of Safety (SOS).
- Increase of permanent workforce.
- Reduction of children in external residential placements.
- Early intervention with families to prevent need/Risk.
- Prevention of children entering care/returning children home where safe to do so.

Details of several projects currently being undertaken were provided to the Panel, as follows:

- Residential.
- Edge of Care.
- Reunification.
- Implementation of SOS.
- SHiFT (overseen by Education & Partnerships).
- Workforce strategy.

Challenges facing the service this year were outlined to Members, as follows:

- Consistency of practice/performance.
- External residential costs.
- Implementation of the reform.
- Demand.
- Recruitment/retention.
- Numbers of children subject to Child Protection Plans (CPPs)/in the authority's care.

Several Corporate Performance Measures were outlined to the Panel, as follows:

- Children currently in the authority's care - 482.
- Children Looked After (CLA) ceased in May 2025 - 21.
- Health assessments completed in timescale - 92%.
- Visits in timescales: Child Protection (CP) - 93%; Children In Need (CIN) - 80%; CLA - 86%.
- Health assessments completed in timescales - 92%.
- Dental checks completed in timescales - 76%.

During the discussion that followed, a Member referred to Early Help and queried general performance. In response, the Panel was advised that the service was steady, though there was a desire to increase resources. There was a good structure to the teams and the re-referral rate was low.

Regarding recruitment and retention and increasing permanence in the workforce, a Member acknowledged that this was a national issue and queried the current rates in Middlesbrough. In response, the Panel was informed that the service currently consisted of around 72% permanent staff and 38% agency staff. There was a succession plan in place, but this would take time to come to fruition. A social work academy had been established to recruit and train Social Workers and there were plans to expand this further.

A discussion ensued in relation to CLA; the following points were raised:

- Once children were returned home, they would continue to be monitored until officers were happy that an application to revoke the respective Care Order could be made. Local Authority involvement would continue via allocation of a Social Worker, who would undertake both announced and unannounced visits; carry out assessments and formulate an evidence base.
- In terms of practice standards, it was explained to the Panel that some were better than others. Monitoring and development work was continually being undertaken to improve those standards that required it; it was important to achieve consistency in terms of good quality practice. This was an improvement journey and work continued.
- A Member referred to Elected Members and their role as Corporate Parents, and also spoke of their experience in applying to be a Foster Carer. The importance of both roles was discussed. It was indicated to the Panel that one project currently being undertaken was looking at re-modelling fostering and examining the role and impact of mentoring.

A Member referred to the emotional aspect of this area of work and queried the impact that this had on staff and sickness/absence levels. In response, the Panel was informed that staff sickness was not particularly high. It was felt that staff showed high resilience and were supported well by management teams. Reference was made to the varying methods that could be employed if staff felt overwhelmed, such as a reduction in their workload. Mention was also made of therapeutic support sessions that had recently been undertaken with some staff, which had also been well received.

A discussion ensued in relation to the different ways in which care was provided, i.e. through fostering, kinship and connected care, residential and parental care arrangements. Consideration was given as to how these arrangements differed, together with the legislation, processes and support involved.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance and contributions to the meeting. It was requested that Members remained mindful of the information provided in preparation for discussing the Panel's work programme at the next meeting.

AGREED that:

- 1) The suggestions made in respect of the scrutiny work programme would be added to the document in preparation for consideration at the Panel's next meeting on 15 July 2025.
- 2) The information, as presented, was noted.

25/28 **PROPOSED SCHEDULE OF MEETING DATES FOR 2025/2026**

A proposed schedule of meeting dates for the Children's Scrutiny Panel for the 2025/2026 Municipal Year was submitted for Members' consideration.

AGREED that the proposed meeting dates for 2025/2026 be approved.

25/29 **DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING - TUESDAY, 15 JULY 2025 AT 4.30 P.M.**

The next meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Panel had been scheduled for Tuesday, 15 July 2025 at 4.30 p.m. in the Mandela Room, Town Hall.

NOTED

25/30 **ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH, IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED.**

None.