

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 15 February 2021.

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

OFFICERS: S Bonner, C Breheny, S Butcher, J Dixon and R Farnham.

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

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were submitted on behalf of Councillor Hill and Councillor High (invited Member in the role of Lead Member for Children's Services).

**** 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 18 January 2021 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

UPDATE – SIX MONTH REVIEW INTO CHILDREN'S SERVICES BY THE COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN MIDDLESBROUGH

S Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services, accompanied by R Farnham, Director of Children's Care, was in attendance to update the Panel with an overview of the Commissioner's six-month review report in relation to Children's Services in Middlesbrough.

By way of background, the Panel was reminded that, following the Ofsted inspection findings published in January 2020, the Secretary of State appointed a Commissioner – Peter Dwyer OBE – in February 2020 who began to work with Middlesbrough's Children's Services in early March 2020.

The Commissioner submitted his first report in April 2020 and, having seen the potential for the service to improve, concluded: "This is not a Local Authority where we should move quickly to consider alternative delivery mechanisms." This recommendation was accepted by the Secretary of State and the Commissioner continued to work with Children's Services two to three days per month up until November 2020.

The Commissioner produced and submitted his second report in December 2020, reiterating the recommendation from his first report, "not to move quickly to consider alternative delivery mechanisms". This was again accepted by the Secretary of State, however, concerns were raised in relation to the authority's caseloads.

The Commissioner's report also recognised that Children's Services in Middlesbrough continued to work with, and through, Covid and was written broadly against the seven enablers of improvement.

The six-month review of the Service was undertaken 9 - 11 November 2020. Over the course of the three days, the Commissioner met with various stakeholders, including:-

- Executive Members
- Chief Executive, Executive Director of Children's Services and other members of the Senior Leadership Team
- Independent Chair of Improvement Board and Director of Children's Services at Redcar and Cleveland (as some of Middlesbrough's services, such as Safeguarding, were shared with

Redcar)

- Senior Leaders from key partners, including CAMHS, Police, Health.
- Staff focus groups – front line and middle managers.
- Focus groups on relevant key themes.
- Engagement through direct communication with front line staff.
- Considered performance data and improvement against the plan.

In terms of leadership, the report acknowledged:-

- Positive new branding 'Middlesbrough Children Matter' – This was important as it was instantly recognisable.
- Political leadership and accountability was significantly strengthened.
- Greater stability in leadership arrangements.
- The local authority operated more effectively corporately on the children's agenda.
- Restructured senior leadership portfolios brought greater coherence to the organisation.
- The Local Authority knows itself – enhanced approach to quality assurance and performance management.
- Invested and prioritised resourcing – appropriate use of Covid funding to drive 'invest to save' initiatives and national improvement resources.

The Director of Children's Care referred to the Commissioner's finding that 'the Local Authority knows itself'. This had improved through enhanced quality assurance and performance management processes. Performance management tools had been developed to ensure: good quality data; services were compliant; and that visits and assessments were taking place within timescales.

The Panel heard that Middlesbrough had worked hard to develop the audit to excellence programme which had been rolled out across the whole Service. This looked at individual cases, teams and Social Workers, examining themes that arose from teams enabling targeted improvement activity to be undertaken. For example, the quality of direct work was improving and management oversight was improving which helped keep children safe. The programme was effective in identifying where the issues were.

In relation to invested and prioritised resourcing, the Panel was informed that soon after the poor Ofsted inspection, a significant amount of money (£3.3 million) was made available and had been used wisely, and included the development of the audit programme. There were invest to save initiatives such as the managed Innovate Team tasked with bringing children back to Middlesbrough placements from expensive out of area placements, where it was appropriate to do so, and good progress was being made. National improvement resources included the Futures for Families programme.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel made reference to the strengthening of political leadership and felt that scrutiny played a big part in this and should possibly be acknowledged in some way. It was queried whether the Commissioner was aware of the scrutiny process and issues being scrutinised in relation to Children's Services within the two children's Scrutiny Panels. The Executive Director responded that during conversations with the Commissioner he was aware of how scrutiny was developing and becoming more robust. It was highlighted that the Chair of Corporate Parenting Board had been interviewed by the Commissioner as part of the inspection.
- Reference was made to quality assurance and it was queried whether children's assessments were being completed in a timely way or whether delays were still being experienced. It was acknowledged that there had been an exponential rise in demand in the system, with children who had not previously been receiving services at the right time now receiving the help they needed in a more timely way. This had created greater demand in the system and an increase in Social Worker caseloads. Timeliness of assessments was still an issue in certain areas of the Service. In December 2020, two additional managed teams were put into the assessment

service and this had resulted in the number of overdue assessments reducing and further assessments being completed within timescales. This was a work in progress but was improving.

- A Panel Member sought clarification and feedback on the use of three new children's homes. The Executive Director responded that the Futures for Families hub comprised a four-bed residential building and this had been delayed by Covid but came on-stream in August 2020. This service was already having a significant impact both with children living in the hub and children on the edge of care and was currently supporting around 40 children to remain with their families. Daniel Court was a supported lodgings accommodation which experienced some delays in opening due to Covid, however, it had opened in November 2020 and was looking towards being fully occupied by April 2021. There was capacity to house nine young people and introductions into the accommodation would be staggered, alongside careful matching. The Director was unsure of the third accommodation to which the Member referred but highlighted that Firtree Lodge had always been in operation whilst Rose Tree was currently closed for refurbishment. The Member responded that he was referring to three applications within the planning process. The Executive Director clarified that these may be in relation to residential homes that were not operated by the Local Authority and that she would be happy to meet outside of the meeting to discuss.
- It was queried whether invested resourcing and prioritised resources referred to Futures for Families and the Innovate Team. The Executive Director stated that Futures for Families was funded by the DfE and there was some intervention around Family Group Conferencing and various initiatives whereby Middlesbrough was being sponsored or supported. The invest to save initiative was around the Innovate Team bringing children back to Middlesbrough where it was appropriate to do so.

In terms of Partnership Approach, the Commissioner found that:-

- The Improvement Board had good oversight of delivering the improvement plan. It held the service to account on the delivery of the plan with overarching progress reports against the plan and spotlight reports at each meeting. The Board was independently chaired by an experienced DCS.
- Reports and analysis had developed over time. Sophisticated levels of thematic analysis particularly around sufficiency planning and locality working. Sufficiency was about making sure that the right children were in the right placements in the right place. Locality working was under development and would comprise focussed resources focussed initially in two specific areas – Newport and North Ormesby. Some services were already working in these areas and Social Care was in the process of planning how this would operate from a social care perspective.
- The Improvement Board operated with existing partnership arrangements. For example, the Children's Trust Board operated with three key wider priorities and was not confused with the activity of the Improvement Board.
- Better communications with schools. Communications with schools had actually been enhanced through Covid with sharing of information and the Local Authority supporting schools around work on vaccinations and supporting Head Teachers who were running a physical and virtual school.
- Joint working opportunities were being taken. For example, Futures for Families and the Multi Agency Children's Hub.
- Frontline staff described improvements in partner engagement in safeguarding activities.
- Keen to pilot locality based approach within some key communities.

The Chair asked whether an example could be provided in relation to 'frontline staff described improvements in partner engagement ...'. The Executive Director considered this to mean better engagement in strategy discussions so that meetings were informed from several perspectives and not just Social Care. The Director of Children's Care added that another example would be the Multi Agency Children's Hub (MACH). The MACH went live in July 2020 and included Middlesbrough's Social Care staff, Police, Health and Education. Staff described the partnership as being very strong and that was seen during the monitoring inspection visit in September.

The Panel was advised that in relation to workforce, the DfE looked at key enablers and workforce development in terms of improvement and the Service had created a workforce development programme that looked at key work streams, recruitment and retention, demand and reducing agency staff whilst increasing permanent staff. In addition, the following was highlighted:-

- Frontline practitioners were positive about targeted training opportunities and better placed to deliver improved practice, for example 16-17 year old homelessness.
- Consistently expressed balanced confidence in the improvement journey.
- Visibility of senior leaders. It was highlighted that the Director of Children's Care was launching a Social Care newsletter and that the Executive Director held weekly virtual meetings with staff – attended by 170 staff at the last meeting. An invitation to attend to observe these meetings was extended to Members.
- Whilst there was an increase in the use of agency Social Workers, this was less than in other authorities and there was successful use of managed teams to assist with capacity and to provide expertise.
- The workforce had embraced opportunities to enhance routes into social work, such as the Frontline programme.
- Sickness absence levels were good. It was noted that it equalled other directorates.
- There had been some progress on the practice model although it had not yet been rolled out.

The Director of Children's Care highlighted that since this finding was made by the Commissioner in November, a great deal of progress had taken place. The practice model was based on 'children and relationships first' and this was the approach taken to working with children and families in Middlesbrough and about 'doing with' and not 'doing to'. It provided staff with the toolkit they needed to deliver good quality social work and early help practice. The Practice Model was heavily linked to the Strengthening Practice Training Programme and practice standards were currently being developed in conjunction with staff and would set expectations from the workforce in working with children and families in Middlesbrough. It was hoped that the standards would be launched during Practice Week commencing 8 March. Members were invited to attend any of the sessions should they wish to do so.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel Member raised a query in relation to the wellbeing of the workforce, Frontline teams and agency staff, some of whom had previously been self-isolating due to Covid. The Director replied that the Frontline staff (the Social Work programme through which graduates entered Social Care in Middlesbrough) had all become newly qualified Social Workers and that sickness absence in those teams was no higher than in other areas of the workforce. Agency Social Workers carried the risk of moving on and this was regrettable when it resulted in changes of social workers for children, however, the workforce was currently stable. The Director stated that she planned to hold a meeting with the agency staff to find out what their experiences of working for Middlesbrough were and how things could be improved. There were examples of some agency staff that had applied to become permanent members of staff.

- A query was raised in relation to delivering better practice in relation to homeless 16-17 year olds and it was queried whether Members should be concerned around the numbers of young people in that group and whether the numbers had increased due to Covid. The Executive Director clarified that the service had not previously been working with the 16-17 year olds in the correct way. In accordance with the Southwark judgement, Children's Services should offer those young people the opportunity to become looked after and to explain the benefits of this to them, for example through supported lodgings. Training had now been undertaken by the workforce relating to this practice. The Director of Children's Care added that there had not been an increase in the number of homeless 16-17 year olds due to Covid and, over the last few months, during lockdown, the numbers of older children coming into care had reduced. 16-17 year olds usually presented as homeless following a family breakdown and they had previously not been offered their right to become looked after.
- Clarification was sought in relation to the local authority's responsibility for care leavers and what help and support was provided for those young people who were vulnerable to exploitation. The Executive Director confirmed that the local authority had a responsibility for care leavers between the ages of 18 – 25. The Service currently supported or kept in touch with 154 care leavers. Personal Advisers worked with care leavers and each young person had a Pathway Plan. This was a multi-agency plan looking at the best way to support them. The Service had particularly kept in touch with care leavers during Covid and additional resources had recently been secured to help support care leavers through this difficult time. The Director added that, as a child, up until the age of 18 the safeguarding responsibilities were very clear around children vulnerable to exploitation. From the ages 18-25 there would be responsibilities around safeguarding them as a vulnerable adult. Each young person had a named personal adviser that would signpost them to the correct support.

The Panel was advised that in relation to practice improvement, the Commissioner found:-

- Too many interventions remained inadequate or in need of improvement.

These were now fully recognised and understood and a range of targeted activity had been developed to support improvement, including:-

- Additional investments being made.
- Disaggregation of the MACH. Although this was not universally supported it had delivered improvements.
- Development of the Sufficiency Strategy.
- Bespoke Innovate Team. There was an option to extend this contract for up to two years on a three-month rolling contract.
- Success of Futures for Families.
- Transferring of work with children to other teams had improved.
- External engagement of others supporting the innovation. North Yorkshire were supporting Middlesbrough with Future for Families and were currently supporting through a review of the Fostering Service.

It was acknowledged that, whilst there was still a long way to go, the Service was in a much better position to continue improving.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- A Member made reference to locality working in Newport and North Ormesby and queried whether those areas had been identified due to significant problems and hoped that targeting resources in those areas would help to make significant improvements to the way in which Social Care practice was delivered. The Executive Director responded that work had been undertaken to analyse various demands in certain wards, such as children in need, child protection and children looked after. Around 1 in 17 of children in North Ormesby came into the local authority's care. The locality teams would be made up from different areas of practice such as early help, street wardens, social care, etc. and resources needed to be targeted in the

best way possible. Those wards had been chosen because of the analysed demand. If successful it may be rolled out to other areas.

- Further explanation was sought in relation to the disaggregation of the MACH not being universally supported. The Executive Director stated that the Police had concerns around the disaggregation. It was a big decision to make as Middlesbrough was in partnership with Redcar and Cleveland, however, the right decision needed to be made for Middlesbrough and its children. The Police would not have chosen for the disaggregation to happen, however, they had continued to work positively with Middlesbrough.

The Panel was provided with a selection of staff feedback comments gathered by the Commissioner. These included positive comments regarding the leadership team; communication and audit systems and also concerns regarding high caseloads. The Panel was advised that caseloads were beginning to stabilise and the average caseload as of today's date was 22.

The Chair commented that caseloads had always been a concern expressed by the Scrutiny Panel and felt that reducing caseloads was critical to the improvement journey. It was acknowledged that the Minister had also expressed concerns regarding high caseloads following the Commissioner's latest report.

In relation to key performance information, the Panel was informed that:-

- There was clearer evidence of improved screening, management oversight and timely decision making at the 'front door' (MACH). This supported the decision to disaggregate the MACH.
- Higher proportion of assessments now resulted in ongoing social care input (88%). This was due to having better thresholds.
- The numbers of children on Child Protection plans was at an all-time high, however, more recently the number of new plans was more relatively stable (as at November).
- The numbers of children in the care system had stabilised over recent months although still at an extremely high comparative rate. The Panel was advised that since the Commissioner's report in November, the numbers had reduced from an all-time high of 702 in August 2020 to 609 as of today's date. Whilst the numbers of children coming into care had slowed slightly, the impact of the edge of care support from Futures for Families was considerable and also more children were being moved on to their permanent forever homes.
- Completion rates of audits needed consistent improvement.
- August 2020 saw less cases being assessed as inadequate but still at a significant level of 40%. In relation to inadequate case audits it was highlighted that whilst there was still a long way to go, improvements were being made and less work was now being assessed as inadequate. The percentage of inadequate case audits was closely monitored by the DfE and this was reported monthly to the Improvement Board. Audits of inadequate cases was required to be at around 5% or less in order to exit intervention. It was highlighted that for the current month within the MACH there were 0% inadequate case audits. 50% required improvement and 50% were good. This was the first area of the service to have 0% inadequate case audits and this provided some assurance that audits were being closely monitored to improve practice in those areas identified as inadequate and also that numbers of inadequate audits were reducing. It was acknowledged that it did become more difficult moving through the system as children's cases became more complex. This would be a long journey but improvements were happening.

A Member of the Panel complimented the Service on the improvements that were being made and queried what the reasons were for the number of Child Protection plans being at an all-time high and whether it related to lowering of thresholds. The Executive Director responded that it was partly about ensuring thresholds were set in the right place and sometimes plans were not put into

place in a timely way. For the first time, Children's Services had less children in care than on child protection plans and less child protection plans than children in need. Better planning was needed and to practice needed to be strengthened but this was all part of the improvement journey.

Finally, in relation to the impact of Covid, the Commissioner found:-

- Covid was never used as an excuse.
- Assessing the impact of Covid was particularly complex.
- Increased demand for assessments and interventions.
- Throughput of work with children was affected with challenges for delivery and availability of Court time. The average time for taking children through the Court process should normally be around 26 weeks, however, it was currently around 32.5 weeks.
- Local Authority and partners were highly visible and impressively proactive.
- Students had enthusiastically returned to school without a tidal wave of additional concerns but heightened concerns around young people already known to the Service.
- Increase in domestic violence and impact on children.

The next steps were:-

- April 2021 - Ofsted focussed visit.
- May 2021 – Commissioner's final report. Following this time the Commissioner would no longer be working with Children's Services, however, an Improvement Adviser – an experienced ex-DCS, would work with the Service on a monthly basis.
- Covid, working through into recovery.
- Practice – this was where thinking and resources needed to be.
- Managing expectations. The next Ofsted visit would focus on practice and as the Service was focusing on practice the report may not read as well. The total focus was on children and individual work. The Service was continuing to improve several weeks on from the Commissioner's report but the hardest part was to come and there was no quick fix.

During discussion the following issues were raised:-

- The Panel acknowledged that it had been a very difficult year for everyone and complimented Children's Services on the way in which it had communicated honestly and transparently with Members throughout this time and ensuring that they were part of the improvement journey. The Executive Director responded that Members were an integral part of the improvement journey and their local knowledge was critical in informing what was happening at a ward level.
- Reference was made to Court proceedings taking around 32.5 and in response to a query it was confirmed that this was a national issue.
- A Panel Member considered it to be a frightening time for young people leaving care and moving to independence and wondered whether Ward Councillors could help with this process in some way. Following some discussion, it was considered that Ward Councillors may have a role to play in terms of signposting young people to appropriate help and that it was something to think about.

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

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

UPDATE - COVID RECOVERY - CHILDREN'S SERVICES

S Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services, provided the Panel with a verbal update in relation to Covid recovery in Children's Services.

The Panel was informed that Social Workers continued to work from home, however, it was an expectation that visits to children were face to face, with appropriate PPE, and that virtual 'visits'

should only be by exception and signed off by a manager.

Social Workers were expected to visit children at the same frequency, depending on the child's needs.

The expectation was very clear that all vulnerable children (ie a child with an assigned Social Worker) should be in school and Social Workers were asked to strongly encourage this. There were reasons why a child may not be in school such as illness, self-isolating or a carer/other child in the house with health reasons.

When a vulnerable child was not in school, schools were expected to call a dedicated telephone number to inform the local authority. A risk assessment would then be undertaken and, where appropriate, a safety plan would be completed for the most at risk children. This was integrated into the LCS system and data could be collated and cross-referenced with Public Health data in terms of children and school staff that were self-isolating. In addition, the Virtual School monitored children looked after who were not in school on a daily basis.

The Executive Director stated that in general the school attendance figures for vulnerable children in Middlesbrough were not where they should be ideally and it had been decided that resources should be focussed on children on Child Protection plans. The rationale behind this was that children looked after should be safe as they were in a foster placement, however, children on Child Protection plans were likely to be most at risk as they remained at home with parents and the fact that they had a Child Protection plan meant that the local authority has concerns.

As previously mentioned there were some delays with Court proceedings – now an average of 32.5 weeks instead of 26 weeks.

It was queried whether Children's Services had a post covid plan and whether the Service was prepared for lockdown ending. The Panel was informed that there was a recovery plan which existed from the first lockdown and that this was being updated as recovery drew closer. The Council-wide response to Covid recovery was very positive.

The Director of Children's Care commented that she was very proud of the workforce and foster carers who had continued to look after vulnerable children during this difficult time.

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 27 and 29 January and 11 February 2021, namely:-

27 January 2021

Budget Consultation

29 January 2021

Call-In – Nunthorpe Grange Farm Disposal

11 February 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 Regeneration (Councillor Waters).
- 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, 22 March 2021 at 4.00pm.

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

With prior agreement the Chair allowed the Chair of Corporate Parenting Board to raise an item relating to the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

Councillor Hellaoui referred to the seven guiding principles within the Corporate Parenting Strategy and advised that each of the principles would form the basis of a spotlight report to be submitted to Corporate Parenting Board. Alongside this, the Chair wished to invite interested Members to attend and work in small groups with each group focussing on one of the principles in detail.

For ease of reference, the seven guiding principles were as follows:-

- Our Home
- Our Friends and Family
- Our Education and Employment
- Our Health and Wellbeing
- Our Adult Life
- Our Voice and Influence
- Our Needs and Wishes

Any Members wishing to be involved were asked to please contact Councillor Hellaoui direct.

NOTED