

**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 22 March 2021.**

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

**OFFICERS:** C Breheny, S Butcher, J Dixon and G Moore.

**PRESENT BY INVITATION:** S Turner – Policy & Participation Manager, Become Charity.  
V Davidson-Boyd – Service Manager, Adoption Tees Valley.  
Councillor Hellaoui – Chair of Corporate Parenting Board.

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** were submitted on behalf of Councillor Cooke 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 15 February 2021 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

**SUFFICIENCY AND PERMANENCY (PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN CARE) – FURTHER INFORMATION – 'STIGMA AND PERCEPTIONS': BECOME CHARITY**

S Turner, Policy and Participation Manager from Become Charity, was in attendance at the meeting to advise the Panel about the work undertaken by Become, particularly in relation to tackling the stigma and negative perceptions faced by care experienced children and young people.

The Panel heard that Become was the National Charity for children in care and young care leavers in England, with one of its strategic aims being to change attitudes towards care experienced young people in society. The Charity provided advice and support through the National Care Advice Line; One to one support and life coaching; weekly link-ups; Propel website and training for professionals. The services provided were youth-led, holistic and trauma-informed and ongoing follow up support was provided to meet the practical and emotional needs of children in care and young care leavers. The Charity was independent from statutory services ensuring that young people felt safe to share their feelings and challenges knowing that they would be listened to without being judged and that action would be taken to make sure they received the right support.

In addition, Become helped to improve the care system by ensuring young people's voices were heard to shape the policies and services that were there to help them. This included working with Government, Parliament, professionals within the care system and others to promote good policy-making and practice, responding to consultations, providing briefings, running campaigns and awareness-raising with the media. Part of the Policy and Participation Manager's role was to involve care experienced young people across these areas in a way that was both safe for them and meaningful.

It was highlighted that Become was formerly known as 'Who Cares Trust', founded by a Social Worker in Westminster who created a magazine that was circulated to children in care.

Stigma and Perceptions

The Policy and Participation Manager shared the most commonly heard quotes from young people around stigma and perceptions. There were many assumptions and stereotypes often made about

children in care and their families which had an impact on their wellbeing and sense of identity. For example, regular local media coverage of children's homes and concerns around ownership often quoted falsehoods and unfounded negative comments about the types of children in the care system.

Sometimes stigma was less easy to identify and could be explained as ignorance and lack of education around the care system. The real facts about how a children's home actually operated and how it looked went a long way to combatting some of the perceptions. The Policy and Participation Manager stated that when speaking to members of the public, many people were surprised to learn that a children's home was usually a three or four bedroomed house designed to feel like a family home.

When speaking to young people, many felt that other people's (peers and professionals) perceptions of the reasons why they were in care, included that it was the young person's fault that they were in care, that they were trouble-makers, or it was due to anti-social behaviour. This was not the case.

Young people often felt that they were deemed to fail, fuelled by low aspirations of professionals and those that thrived felt they were bucking the trend. Those young people that had encountered the Police for the first time often felt that they were treated like criminals when they had done nothing wrong and that incorrect assumptions were made in relation to anti-social behaviour or drug taking for example.

Often, the idea of feeling sorry for them or that they were more fragile than other young people and labelling the young person as being in care could be problematic. This happened often in school, often around additional tuition or meetings they may be required to attend. Feedback from those young people was that they wanted to be treated the same as any other child in school. They wanted to be children first and children in care second. They sometimes worried about what their friends thought of them and worried that they were only friends with them to 'be nice' to them because they were in care.

On the other hand, in a recent discussion with young adults around what being a care leaver was, they spoke about social intelligence and 'sussing' people out and the ability to navigate bureaucracy well. The use of the word resilient was often used to describe children in care and care leavers and resilience was often celebrated. Some young people felt uncomfortable around the use of the term as they never wanted to be resilient. It was not a choice, it was something that they had to be.

The Panel was informed that in 2017 Become undertook some specific research to explore with children in care how they felt they were perceived by others, such as teachers, social workers and peers and the impact this had on them. A link to the document 'Perceptions of Care' had been circulated to the Panel and this work was based on a series of focus groups and a survey. The key statistics that resulted from the work were highlighted as follows:-

- 50% of children in care and 51% of care leavers agreed that "People think it is the children's fault that they are in care."
- 39% of children in care and 43% of care leavers disagreed with the statement "Other children's parents do not treat children in care differently to other children."
- 30% of children in care and 42% of care leavers agreed with the statement that "Where I live, people would not like it if someone opened a children's home."

The Policy and Participation Manager stated that consistently, care leavers appeared more aware than children in care, in relation to some of the differences of how they were portrayed compared to their peers.

The 2017 study was followed up in 2018 with 'Teachers who Care' which looked at teacher training and supporting children in care in schools. The study included a series of questions around knowledge, attitude and stigma and were answered by more than 450 teachers. The aim of the study was to find out whether teachers had heard similar views to those expressed by children in

care. Unfortunately, for the most part this was borne out and demonstrated some of the negative stereotypes and low aspirations held by some professionals working with children and young people.

The study highlighted that 87% of respondents had heard at least one colleague express a negative generalisation about children in care and that 37% of respondents had heard such views often.

The Chair queried whether there was any data in relation to how many times the respondents had challenged those negative comments about children in care expressed by their colleagues and that it would be interesting to see whether those views were being challenged. The Policy and Participation Manager agreed that this would be interesting and may be a piece of possible follow up work in the future.

The Teachers Who Care 2018 report made nine recommendations to schools, training providers, Government and Local Authorities, including a call for the introduction of mandatory training on working with children in care in all schools for all teachers both before and after they qualified.

The findings of the report were developed into a resource, "I Wish You Knew", highlighting the six key things children in care wished their teachers to know about their experience.

Links to positive work undertaken by other organisations, such as Coram and Life Changers Trust Scotland, had also been circulated to Panel Members.

The Policy and Participation Manager stated that in terms of challenging some of the perceptions and making care a more comfortable thing to think about, the following could be considered:-

- Media reporting and representation of care experienced people. For Example, Who cares Scotland had a media club that supported challenging some of the typical tv and film tropes around care experience which was crucial when so much of young people's awareness of the care system came from films, books, media and tv shows, such as Tracy Beaker.
- Language. Dialogue around the care system was amplified by people's responses. For example, 'myth-busting' often had the opposite effect in practice, either reinforcing stereotypes that people already had or introducing people who were unaware of stereotypes to new ones.
- Frameworks. This was written in the Scottish context but had a number of parallels and learning that was relevant in England. This looked at trying to change the way people thought and spoke about care experience to dispel some of the stigma. It set out some analysis of typical framings of care experienced children and young people. The study looked at reframing issues so that there was a shift in public attitudes towards care experienced young people to address and end stigma and create systematic change.
- Training. In the context of 'Teachers Who Care', Become had pushed for training in relation to children in care to form a part of all initial teacher training courses and for relevant training for all frontline staff in health care settings and Police. Become had delivered training with Personal Advisers, teachers, social workers, Ofsted inspectors as well as other organisations.
- Proactively embedding care experienced children within their local community. Engaging children in care in community activities and events, alongside their peers, such as sports and leisure clubs and other services and allowing communities to speak with and listen to children in care would prevent some of the fear that crept into some people's perceptions. Children in care often reported feeling very disconnected from their local community, especially those that had moved around a lot or were living out of area.
- APPG. Become provided secretariat support for the All Party Parliamentary Group for children looked after and care leavers. This was a cross-parliamentary group of MPs and Peers that had an interest in improving the care system and promoting good quality government policy-making. Become had recently launched a spotlight inquiry particularly exploring themes around

care and community around the country. This included holding a series of evidence gathering sessions and reaching out to young people to find out how they had been supported to feel part of their local or wider communities and how local communities had been supported to respect and better understand the care experienced members. A North East session would be held in the coming months and it was hoped that the Scrutiny Panel may be able to contribute in some way.

The Panel was provided with the opportunity to ask questions and the following issues were raised:-

- A Member referred to the 'Teachers Who Care' report and noted that 80% of teachers stated that they had received no training in relation to looked after and 75% who had qualified after 2010 stated they had received no training. The Member fully supported the Become's recommendation that training should be provided during all initial teacher training programmes and suggested that the Scrutiny Panel make a recommendation, and action as soon as possible, engagement with all schools in Middlesbrough to ensure appropriate training for teachers be provided as soon as possible, in collaboration with Social Workers, the Virtual School and other agencies, including more sharing of information and resources. The Executive Director considered that this needed to be done in conjunction with the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel.
- In response to a query as to whether Become provided individual advocacy, it was explained that Become was not a formal advocacy service in the way that was normally commissioned from a local authority, but people usually contacted them through the Care Advice line when they had been through an advocate but this had not resolved their query or where they were not at the point where they wanted to involve an advocate but were interested in the options available to them in relation to advocacy or making a formal complaint or even a legal challenge. Whilst Become was not a formal advocacy service, it challenged decisions with local authorities directly where it had permission from the young person to do so.
- The Executive Director queried how Become was feeding into the National Review on Children's Social Care and how much scope there was to push some of the organisation's ideas forward into the review. The Policy and Participation Manager responded that the scope of the review had morphed from its original commitment in 2019 to review the care system. It had been expected that the review would focus on those that were formally looked after but it had evolved into a review of children's social care in its entirety – from the point of first referral. Become was very interested in the review's potential to deliver change that young people had told them that they wanted to see. Become's work so far had been to try and understand how the review was communicating with young people and trying to share learning on how to consult with children and young people in a way that was safe for young people so that they would not be re-traumatised and also to value their lived experience and expertise. Through the APPG, Become was providing a lot of the administrative work and co-ordination for the inquiry and hoped to feed that into the review with a series of recommendations. It was suggested that it would be beneficial for the Panel to receive a short briefing on the Care Review, for information.
- A Member referred to the quotes from young people in relation stigma and perceptions and wondered how many more young people held similar opinions and asked what avenues were available to invite people to express their views and feelings. The Policy and Participation Manager responded that there were a few different ways in which Become tried to listen and respond to young people and to create safe spaces where they could work with Become to challenge on a national level. Become worked closely with structures that were already in place, such as Children in Care Councils as well as creating groups to campaign on particular issues. Local structures included Children in Care Councils, Advocacy Forums, participation groups, Corporate Parenting Boards. Nationally, organisations such as Become needed to engage young people that wanted to share their views.
- A Panel Member commented that the young peoples' comments in relation to stigma and perceptions were two-sided and that it appeared that their views were not only around how they

felt others had poor perceptions of children in care but also that they felt some people over-compensated for them being in care and tried to be 'too nice' to them because they felt sorry for them.

- A Member of the Panel commented that he had been aware of children who were not in care but were receiving help that had experienced negative views towards them and that they were made to feel different and believed that schools needed to be more involved in eradicating stigma and that all teachers should receive training.
- It was noted that of the five direct quotes from young people, two referred to the Police, one of the local authority's partners in relation to safeguarding, and it was queried whether this was a proportionate representation. The Policy and Participation Manager stated that it was not necessarily reflective of what young people had to say in relation to perceptions and stigma generally, but the quotes had been included from a specific piece of exploratory work undertaken with young people. The Harvard League had produced a piece of work in relation to the criminalisation of children in care, mainly in residential settings, and why young people in care often became involved in the Youth Justice system.
- A Panel Member stated that it was not the fault of the child that they were in care and queried whether some children felt ashamed to be in care because they had been made to feel that they were the problem and also believed that training for everyone would be beneficial to eradicate the stigma of being in care and to raise understanding of the care system and queried what steps the Panel could take to assist. Reference was also made to Tracy Beaker and how it had impacted on people's perceptions of care.
- In response, it was acknowledged that Tracy Beaker had almost become a symbol of the care system to a lot of young people and how it framed public awareness and discourse around the care system. The importance of good quality life-story work and explaining to young people the reasons why they had come into care was key to dispelling stigma and perceptions around care. Some young people in a recent session had expressed the view that whilst it was not their fault that they were in care, this ended up shifting blame and stigma onto parents and families which young people felt uncomfortable about because they could see that their parents and families were not getting the help that they needed from the care system. In terms of how the Panel could help, it was suggested that sharing the Charity's contact details with young people:-
  - who were interested in getting involved in campaigning and policy work at a national level
  - to access the advice and support services offered by Become
  - to access signposting services
  - to access community-building programmes such as on-line meetings to chat and play games in a safe space.
  - The Panel could also challenge stigma when it happened and look at language choices within the local authority.
- A Panel Member commented that links could be made with Middlesbrough's Children in Care Council and Youth Council in relation to changing perceptions and use of language. The Policy and Participation Manager stated that some young people were proud to be care leavers and wanted to celebrate that as part of their identity, whilst other young people who were care experienced wanted to share their views and expertise but not in a way that was as visible. This could be recognised through CiCCs and also that their expertise did not necessarily need to link to care as they had unique views on many other issues such as health and education.
- In relation to the use of language, the Chair highlighted that many terms currently in use had replaced other terms deemed unsuitable, perhaps 20 years ago and that it was important to strive to be pace-setters and to learn why particular terms should or should not be used.
- A Member suggested that the Corporate Parenting Board could engage with the Children in

Care Council and Youth Parliament to involve them in policy and campaigning initiatives and to possibly interview each other and other people involved concerned with these issues. It was queried whether, as Councillors, there was any way of linking into the APPG for looked after children and care leavers. The Policy and Participation Manager advised that the first opportunity to become involved would be to link into the first online North East evidence gathering session and that details of this could be forwarded to Members.

The Chair thanked the Policy and Participation Manager for his attendance and the information provided.

**AGREED** that the information provided be noted in the context of the Panel's current scrutiny review of Sufficiency and Permanency (Perceptions of Children in Care).

### **SUFFICIENCY AND PERMANENCY (PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN CARE) – FURTHER INFORMATION – TEES VALLEY ADOPTION**

V Davidson-Boyd, Service Manager from Adoption Tees Valley, was in attendance at the meeting to provide the Panel with an overview of the Adoption Tees Valley service in the context of sufficiency and permanency, and how it worked with the five Tees Local Authorities, particularly Middlesbrough.

It was highlighted that Adoption Tees Valley's Bi-annual Report had been circulated to Panel Members, prior to the meeting, for information as background reading to accompany the agenda.

The Service Manager stated that there had been an improvement in several areas of work within Middlesbrough over the last six months, particularly in terms of permanency planning.

By way of background to the service, it was explained that Adoption Tees Valley (ATV) was established in 2018, in line with the Government's aim to see all local authorities with adoption responsibilities participate in Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) by 2020. The key drivers for this were that children were waiting too long to be adopted and to improve adoption support and outcomes for adopted children.

The RAAs had provided ongoing opportunities for collaborative thinking and working, sharing of ideas and good practice and stimulating focus on adoption at national and regional levels. The RAAs also provided a larger pool of adoptive families resulting in increased adoptions - previously around 150 local authorities each carrying out a small number of adoptions but now there were currently 40 RAAs carrying out an increased number of adoptions.

Adoption Tees Valley was the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) for the five local authorities within the Tees Valley – Middlesbrough, Stockton, Hartlepool, Darlington and Redcar and Cleveland. ATV was responsible for:-

- Recruitment, assessment and approval of adoptive families
- Receiving referrals of children for adoption
- Family finding
- Matching and placing children with adoptive families
- Life story work and books
- Step-parent adoptions

The Panel was provided with detailed information regarding the adoption process – both in terms of the child's journey and the adopters' journey.

#### Child's Journey

The process for the referral, matching and placement of children through adoption was as follows:-

- All children in the care of the local authority were assessed to determine the most suitable care plan.
- Once the permanence plan was known, where the plan was for adoption, it must first be approved by the relevant local authority's Agency Decision Maker (ADM).
- It was essential for any child's plan where adoption may be a possibility to notify ATV at the earliest opportunity in order for preliminary family finding to commence.
- ATV commenced initial family finding internally by identifying any potentially suitable approved adopters for the child.
- Where no internally approved adopters existed, ATV commenced the early stages of external family finding.
- Final proceedings were concluded in Court by seeking the grant of a Placement Order to authorise the local authority to place the child for adoption.
- Once a Placement Order had been granted this signified the start of the formal family finding process, however, it was beneficial to have undertaken family finding work prior to the Placement Order being granted in order to avoid delays for the child. It was highlighted that this had been an area of challenge and it was essential for the RAA to have sufficient knowledge of the child coming through for adoption.
- Once a family had been identified that could meet the child's needs, an Adoption Support Plan was created to support the child and adopters.
- The proposed match between the child and adopters was presented to an adoption placement Matching Panel, where a recommendation was made for approval or otherwise.
- Once approved, the child was placed with the adopters following a process of introductions.
- An Adoption Order was sought and granted by the Court.

#### Recruitment of Adopters

A key area of ATV's work was Recruitment and Marketing. ATV had a dedicated Recruitment and Marketing Team who continually marketed ATV and recruited potential adopters – providing information and awareness about adoption. ATV's role was to assess and prepare potential adopters for approval to ultimately adopt a child/children.

This work clearly fell within the remit of ATV as Regional Adoption Agency to:-

- Provide adopter resources for the five local authorities.
- To receive referrals and notifications of children in order to advise on and provide suitable matches to all the local authority children's social workers for all of the children they refer through to ATV for adoption.

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

- The Chair asked whether there was any scope for Specialist Adoption Social Workers. The Service Manager stated that there would be a risk in having specialist adoption Social Workers within the local authority as there could potentially be a lot of movement for the children to that specialist Worker. ATV should be, and was, the specialist resource and agency advising the child's Social Worker within the local authority. Whilst new operating models should never be ruled out, ATV was the specialist resource with all of its staff coming from the adoption services of the local authorities. ATV's practice model was to share, guide, lead and advise the child's Social Worker so that they understood what they needed to do. Training had been provided to Social Workers in Middlesbrough and across the Tees Valley to help them understand more about developing the care plan for adoption and the information that must be provided as part of that process. Child Permanence Report training had been delivered by ATV and this had been complimented in Middlesbrough by further training directed by the Executive Director of Children's Services.
- A Panel Member queried how birth parents were involved in the adoption process. The Service Manager stated that birth parents were an incredibly important part in the life of an adopted child and that no child should have an adoption plan if a parent was able to offer a safe placement for them. Being with family was the best placement for any child and children who

came through for adoption were children where parents were unable to make the required changes within specified timescales and where opportunities for change had been exhausted. ATV had enhanced the work undertaken with birth parents so that where there was a plan for adoption for their child, the birth parents were able to make an active contribution to the plan and to life-story work and were also helped to understand that the role in their child's life would not disappear. In terms of post-adoption support, it was highlighted that children who had been adopted had changing identity needs as they grew up and that knowledge of birth parents and family members was important. In fact, possible contact in the future with birth parents could not be ruled out. A Voluntary Adoption Agency had been commissioned to provide independent birth parent support in the Tees Valley and this provision was re-tendered for last year in order to provide a more vibrant service, following consultation with birth parents in terms of what the process of engagement with birth parents should look like – including more than one contact from the support service to encourage them to take up the support available. Having a child adopted was a difficult time for birth parents and could trigger lifestyle issues as a coping mechanism to come to terms with what was happening. In addition, within the ATV's Adoption Preparation Training, three individual birth parents volunteered to speak at the group sessions to share their experiences of how their child came to be adopted and this made the adopters shift their understanding and perceptions around birth parents and provided them with empathy towards the birth parents and made them want to commit to the letterbox service as part of the adoption plan. The current birth parent volunteers had become very important members of the ATV team.

- A Member of the Panel referred to how adoption had changed over the years and that the more recent emergence of television programmes such as long lost family portrayed adopted children tracing and meeting their birth parents and that often the perception was that such cases always had a happy ending. It was acknowledged that there could be positives and negatives for birth parents and also for adopters and adopted children and that all of these issues should form part of the adoption processes. It was queried whether it was still the case that contact could only be made if the adopted child sought out their birth parents but not where the birth parents sought out the child. The Service Manager clarified that this was the case once a child became an adult and that adoption agencies would not routinely promote direct contact if it was not part of the child's plan. Letterbox contact arrangements were established at the point of adoption and this was done on an individual basis, depending on what was best for each individual child. For example, it might be appropriate for a grandparent or the child's former foster carer to form part of those arrangements and the timings of when the information was exchanged would be established to best suit the child's needs. It was common for siblings to maintain contact post-adoption. ATV had introduced a therapeutic parenting programme and training for adoptive parents to help with recognising that an adopted child's identity needs would evolve as they grew up. Children often re-worked their identity around the teenage years and it was important to find different ways of discussing adoption with the child in age appropriate ways and this formed part of the Adoption Support offer.
- It was also highlighted that ATV had commenced work with children and young people to look at how to train teachers to understand more about adoption and adopted children. A researcher currently linked to ATV focussing on life-story work, was currently working with some adopted teenagers who helping to focus about the issues for adopted children and teenagers. There was a concept that adopted children were 'invisible', yet they did have needs and history that often caused them great emotional turmoil as they were growing up. It was important to help other people understand that adopted children needed to be given recognition and thought about more consciously across all universal services to recognise their needs. A group had recently been established to look at life story work and issues in other areas of daily life that were important to raise awareness and improve support.

#### ATV working with Middlesbrough's Children's Services

It was recognised that Middlesbrough had experienced a difficult journey over the last few years and ATV had worked closely with Middlesbrough, particularly over the past six to 12 months, with a



real drive through the Improvement Board to look at how permanency planning could be improved generally.

ATVs permanency champion was working closely with managers and the Permanence Monitoring Group focussing on children and their permanence plans to ensure that those with plans for adoption were progressed, and any issues resolved, in a timely way. This had resulted in an increase in the numbers of children in Middlesbrough having their agency decision for adoption agreed and ultimately being placed with adoptive parents.

Timescales were currently very long for Middlesbrough children but this was reflective of children who had already been adopted and some of those children were considered 'harder to place'. For example, children over the age of 5 years (7 children placed in last 12 months), and larger sibling groups, but there had been real improvement.

Adoption Orders in Middlesbrough had increased by 30% compared with the same time period last year and the number of children actually placed for adoption had risen over the year and the children who had an agency decision for adoption demonstrated that Middlesbrough had made progress compared with the other authorities and this had been achieved within the context of Covid.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- In response to a query regarding kinship care, the Executive Director of Children's Services clarified that with difference between a Connected Persons Foster Care placement, or 'Kinship Care' as it was sometimes known (the child remained looked after and parental responsibility was held by the local authority); and an adoptive placement (adopters had parental responsibility for the child). Regardless of kinship carers predominantly being family members, the local authority held parental responsibility for the child. It was acknowledged that there would be many cases where birth parents had made private arrangements with family members caring for a child but there had been no local authority involvement. Where Children's Services had become involved and made the placement with a family member, that was a kinship placement and it was acknowledged that this could be confusing. This was one of the reasons that the local authority tried to achieve permanency through Special Guardianship arrangements as this gave the carers parental responsibility, with some PR being retained by the birth parent. It was highlighted that the Agency Decision Maker should not make a decision for a child to be placed for adoption unless absolutely certain which was a massive responsibility. The ADM needed to ensure that the Child Permanence Report was of sufficient quality that it could be understood by the child when they were older and also evidence that adoption was the only avenue available. CPRs were returned where there was a possibility that a family member may be able to care for the child. All avenues needed to be explored. It was suggested that a briefing could be provided to a future meeting in relation to the different care pathways available.
- A Panel Member queried the average time that children wait to be placed in an adoptive placement from the point that their plan for adoption was approved. The Service Manager advised that timescales varied between different children and efforts to enhance the understanding of children coming through for adoption whilst also increasing the sufficiency of adopters were ongoing. Having resources in place meant that children could be matched and placed much more quickly. In Middlesbrough, the average timescale for children being placed for adoption, over the past year, from the point of entering the care system was 679 days. It was acknowledged that this figure included some children who had waited a very long time and also some children who were adopted by their foster carer following an extensive search for adopters prior to that. One of the big challenges was around placing older children and sibling groups and recruitment of prospective adopters who were willing to take older children and sibling groups needed to be focussed on. Overall in ATV, the timescales were reducing and some local authorities who had experienced big challenges in terms of the number of days children had waited, on average, were reducing. Middlesbrough had 20 children placed for

adoption but not yet adopted, therefore, from April 2021, Middlesbrough would have a high number of Adoption Orders being granted through Court.

- There were very small numbers of children with extended waiting times and this resulted in average timescales looking much longer. The ATV Service Manager worked closely with the Heads of Service for Looked after Children in each Local authority to ensure the right families were found for the children coming through for adoption. It was essential to get the right match and the right support plan for families.
- A Panel Member expressed concern around the length of time a child might wait to be adopted and the relationship with their foster carer, for example, the child may become attached to the carer and find it increasingly difficult to move on to a new home. The Service Manager agreed and stated that sometimes, the child would go on to be adopted by their foster carer where this was the right plan for them.
- It was queried where a child had lived in foster placement for a year but it was known that the child would be moved to an adoptive placement, how much time the child was given to get to know their adopters. It was clarified that adoptive placements were not 'tested out' however, a robust introduction process took place and this included foster carers meeting the prospective adopters and getting to know each other as research showed that good relationships between the foster carers and adopters provided better outcomes for the child. This also helped to maintain contact post adoption as moving on from a stable foster care placement could feel like a significant loss for a child and this needed to be built into the contact plan and adopters needed to be aware of this.
- In response to a query regarding placing BAME children for adoption with BAME families, the Panel was informed that ATV tended to have to go to external placements for children from BAME communities in order to fulfil matching needs. Sometimes white adopters were able to meet and promote the needs of BAME children. This was a challenge nationally and RAAs needed to reach out to more BAME people to become adopters. ATV currently had three BAME families in assessment. This was a small proportion of prospective adopters and ATV was trying to promote and encourage recruitment of BAME adopters through national adoption week. It was highlighted that in the Tees Valley region, the greatest proportion of children of BAME ethnicity were children with dual heritage – one white parent and one BAME parent – with no predominant ethnicity or religion.

The Chair thanked the Service Manager for her attendance and for the information provided.

**AGREED** that the information provided be noted and considered the context of the Panel's current scrutiny review of Sufficiency and Permanency (Perceptions of Children in Care).

#### **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 advised that all schools had reopened from 8 March 2021 - some schools had adopted a phased return - with no specific issues identified. It was confirmed that the funding received for laptop provision in schools had now been distributed.

In relation to the attendance of vulnerable children at school, it was highlighted that more than 90% of vulnerable children had attended school for at least one day between 8-12 March.

The Panel was informed that the Local Authority had been successful in securing funding for 'Welfare Call' – a mechanism that provided live data for tracking Middlesbrough's vulnerable children more effectively by providing daily attendance data as well as monitoring attainment of vulnerable cohorts.

Covid-19 testing in schools was going well and relationships between schools and the Local Authority was positive and continued to strengthen.

Finally, Children's Services, in conjunction with Public Health, had arranged delivery of enrichment activities during the Easter school holidays and beyond, provided by the Holiday Activities Fund (HAF).

**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 meeting held on 11 March 2021, namely:-

- Executive Forward Work Programme
- Executive Member Update – The Mayor
- Middlesbrough Council's Response to Covid-19
- Final Report – Economic Development & Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel – Pest Control
- Final Report – Health Scrutiny Panel – Opioid Dependency: What happens next?
- OSB Call-in outcome – Nunthorpe Grange Farm Disposal
- Scrutiny 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, 19 April 2021 at 4.00pm.