

**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 19 April 2021.**

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

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

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

**PRESENT AS AN OBSERVER:** Councillor G Ford – London Borough of Havering Council.

**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 22 March 2021 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

**INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE**

S Davies, Principal Social Worker, was in attendance at the meeting to provide the Panel with an overview in relation to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

The Panel was informed that the Government's manifesto had committed to review the children's social care system to ensure that children and young people got the support they needed. The review would also consider how the care system responded to all children referred in to it and would address major challenges including:-

- the sharp increase in recent years in the number of children becoming looked after
- high and rising unit costs
- inconsistencies in children's social care practice and outcomes across the country
- the failure of the system to provide stable, loving homes for children
- the capacity and capability of the system to support and strengthen families to prevent children being taken into care unnecessarily.

The review was launched in January 2021 and was being independently led by Josh MacAlister, a former school teacher and founder of the Social Work Charity Frontline.

The scope of the review was as follows:-

- Starting from children's experiences – looking at how service provision influenced a child's experience and outcomes. It would prioritise listening to the voices of children, young people and adults that had received help or support from a Social Worker, or who had been looked after.
- All children who were referred to, or involved with, statutory social care – a whole system review, including relevant preventative services such as Early Help.
- All children in care in both formal and informal (kinship) placements – it may also consider those leaving or preparing to leave care, adoption and SEND review.

- Children's social care and interaction with partner agencies – it would review and investigate how those services' roles, responsibilities and accountabilities interacted with Children's Social Care and recommend improvements for working together.

It was highlighted that the review must be workable and lead to deliverable reforms that were evidence-based and demonstrated a measurable impact.

The Panel was informed that the review would focus on the following themes and questions:-

- Support - What support was needed to meet the needs of children who were referred to or involved with social care, in order to improve outcomes and make a long-term positive difference to individuals and to society?
- Strengthening families - What could be done so children were supported to stay safely and thrive with their families, to ensure the exceptional powers that were granted to the state to support and intervene in families were consistently used responsibly, balancing the need to protect children with the right to family life, avoiding the need to enter care?
- Safety - What could be done so children who needed to be in care got there quickly, and to ensure those children felt safe and were not at risk of significant harm?
- Care - What was needed for children to have a positive experience of care that prioritised stability, providing an alternative long-term family for children who needed it and support for others to return home safely?
- Delivery - What were the key enablers to implement the review and raise standards across England, such as a strong, stable and resilient workforce, system leadership and partnerships, and what was needed so that this change could be delivered?
- Sustainability - What was the most sustainable and cost-effective way of delivering services, including high-cost services, who was best placed to deliver them, and how could this be improved so that they were fit for the future?
- Accountability - What accountability arrangements were necessary to ensure that the state could act appropriately, balancing the need to protect and promote the welfare of children with the importance of parental responsibility, and what was needed to ensure proper oversight of how local areas discharged those responsibilities consistently?

The over-arching question that the review aimed to cover was "How we can ensure that children grow up in loving, safe and stable families and, where that was not possible, that care provides the same foundations."

There were various ways in which to become involved in the review, including:-

- Call for Advice – Individuals were able to contact the Lead Reviewer with advice and more than 750 responses had been received to date. There was a commitment for every submission to be read and considered as to how it could shape the review.
- Call for Evidence – primarily aimed at the research community and those with robust evidence that should be considered by the review panel. The call for evidence would consider what was already known about how well the current care system provided love, stability and safety for young people. There had been 200 responses to date.
- From Middlesbrough's point of view, Middlesbrough Council staff could submit their own responses or collective responses.

The review was still in the early stages and groups were still being established to consider how the review should be conducted. This included:-

- Experience by Experts Board – meeting regularly. Two advisory groups consisting of care experienced young people, children's social care professionals, politicians and researchers would feed advice into the Board.
- Evidence Group – made up of academics and experts in the field would support and advise on the evidence being collected. The 'What Works Centre' would support the review by producing and commissioning evidence summaries, rapid reviews and new analysis.
- Design Group – multi-agency group involving a range of professionals across local government, policing, the judiciary, health, education and other areas.

The groups would make recommendations that would contribute towards the case for change in early Summer.

The Panel was advised that people could be kept up to date with the review, including events that would be taking place throughout the year, such as webinars giving the opportunity to hear from experts by experience panel members, progress updates from the independent review chair and there was also the chance to sign up to receive email updates. Members were advised that links to the events and email sign up were included in the presentation which had been circulated to the Panel by email.

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

- Reference was made to the 750 responses to Calls for Advice and it was queried whether they had been submitted by members of the public or professionals. The Principal Social Worker explained that the responses had been submitted from a range of sources, including individuals and professionals. A breakdown of the responses showed that the majority were submitted by Children's Social Care workers, those with personal experience, carers, charities, education, researchers, health care workers.
- It was queried whether there was a specific impetus for this piece of work taking place. It was explained that the review had been agreed as it was part of the Government's manifesto and it had been referred to as a 'once in a generation review'. The original scope of the review was to focus in on some of the inconsistencies in practice across the country and also to try to gain a better understanding of the increased in the numbers of children becoming looked after. It was a wholly independent review with an independent chair and there were no preconceived ideas about what the outcomes would be. It was open to consultation with a wide range of people that would be effected by the review.

The Chair thanked the Principal Social Worker for attending and for the information provided.

**AGREED** that the information provided be noted.

### **SUFFICIENCY AND PERMANENCY (PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN CARE) – OVERVIEW OF THE PANEL'S REVIEW TO DATE**

The Chair referred to the briefing note that had been provided circulated with the agenda which provided a recap of the evidence the Panel had received to date at each of its meetings in respect of its current review. The Terms of Reference for the review were also provided. The Chair asked Members how the Panel wished to proceed with the review and whether there were any further areas that required further examination prior to the compilation of the Draft Final Report.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel Member suggested that it would be interesting to look at life skills for young people leaving care and how they are prepared for moving to independence. It was acknowledged that whilst this issue did not relate directly to the terms of reference for the current review, it might be something that the Panel could potentially examine in the future as a separate topic.
- A Member suggested that some initial research into whether there were links between poverty and children coming into care could be undertaken.
- A Panel Member highlighted that the voice of the child, particularly in relation to perceptions of children in care, should be gathered, for example, seeking out the views of children in foster care in Middlesbrough.
- A further suggestion in relation to diversity in terms of looked after children within diverse communities within the town should be looked into, however, it was acknowledged that as part of the profile of Middlesbrough's looked after children, provided to the Panel in accordance with Term of Reference 1), this had been addressed in very broad terms. Any further detailed work would need to be undertaken as a separate topic.
- The Democratic Services Officer suggested that the Draft Final Report be formulated for Members' consideration and that should any areas be identified as requiring further information, this could be added to the report prior to its submission to OSB.
- The Executive Director added that since the start of the review, changes had started to happen within the service, particularly the reduction in the numbers of looked after children, and that she would be pleased to provide a short update in relation to the ongoing work for inclusion within the Draft Final Report.
- It was acknowledged that the Panel had undertaken a significant amount of work during the current Municipal Year and it was generally agreed that the review should be concluded within the remit as set by the terms of reference.

**AGREED** as follows:-

1. That the Draft Final Report be prepared for the Panel's consideration, with a brief addendum from the Executive Director of Children's Services in relation to ongoing work within Children's Services.
2. That any areas identified as requiring additional information, with the approval of the Chair, be undertaken and included in the Draft Final Report.

**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 the Covid situation was moving from the response to the recovery stage, therefore all recovery plans were now being refreshed. The Children's Services and Education Covid recovery groups were to be reinstated.

Since Easter, only five staff and 14 pupils, all at one school, had been in self-isolation due to Covid. SACRE was undertaking risk assessments in relation to whether two workers could now make home visits together as this was a significant part of the workers' learning and development.

Covid lateral flow testing continued in schools and there had been no issues.

It was suggested that, moving forward into the new Municipal Year, the item on Covid recovery could be reported to the Panel by exception rather than as a standard item.

**AGREED** that the information provided be noted and that the item on Covid Recovery in Children's Services be reported by exception to the Panel in future.

## **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE**

The Chair provided a verbal update in relation to the business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 8 April 2021, namely:-

- Executive Forward Work Programme
- Middlesbrough Council's Response to Covid-19
- Executive Member Update – Exec Member for Communities and Education.
- Strategic Plan 2020-2023 – Progress at quarter three 2020-21.
- Revenue and capital budget – projected outturn position at quarter three 2020-21.
- Scrutiny Chairs' Updates

**AGREED** that the information provided be noted.

## **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

### Adoption Tees Valley

The Chair advised that, following the Panel's previous meeting – attended by the Service Manager from Adoption Tees Valley who provided a very comprehensive presentation - Panel Members were consulted to find out whether they had any further questions they wished to ask. A couple of responses were received from Panel Members and those questions were forwarded to the Service Manager at Adoption Tees Valley. The Service Manager had subsequently updated the report that was provided to the previous meeting and the responses to the additional questions were contained within pages 10-13. A copy of the updated report was circulated to the Panel, for information on 16 April 2021 and had been updated on Modern.gov.

### Become Charity - Training in relation to children looked after

Also at the Panel's previous meeting, the Policy and Participation Manger from Become Charity was in attendance to talk about stigma and perceptions of children in care and care leavers.

A couple of things that came out of the discussion were:-

- The importance of language and the damage and detrimental impact that negative language and use of stereotypes can cause by changing perceptions and attitudes.
- The Panel felt that training for all teachers in Middlesbrough schools should be provided in relation to children looked after, including the use of language and stereotypes
- AND that similar training be provided for Members and frontline staff, where appropriate, and also that the local authority look at the use of language within its own services to address negative perceptions and stigma.

In conjunction with the CYP Learning Scrutiny Panel, the Panel had asked what training is currently provided for teachers or how it is planned to address the concerns raised.

In addition, initial enquiries were made with Become Charity to find out what support they might be able to provide to the local authority in terms of training if required.

The Executive Director advised that, as DCS, she intended to select several commonly used/heard phrases/acronyms, for example 'LAC', 'CiN', 'Hard to reach', and would approach how to stop them being used across the authority.