

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 27 July 2021.

PRESENT: Councillor Garvey (Chair), Councillor Dodds (Vice Chair); Councillors: Higgins, Jones, Uddin and Wilson.

OFFICERS: S Bonner, S Butcher and J Dixon.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were submitted on behalf of Councillors Nugent, M Storey and J Walker.

**** 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 19 April 2021 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

S Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services, was in attendance at the meeting to provide the Panel with an overview of the main services within its remit and to outline the key priorities, issues and challenges for the year ahead.

The Executive Director explained that her post was a statutory role that all local authorities were required to have. All local authorities were also required to have a Lead Member for Children's Services and this role was currently being fulfilled by the Mayor in Middlesbrough.

The Executive Director was responsible for children in Middlesbrough, both in terms of social care and education, heading up a single Children's Services and emphasised the importance of all parts of the directorate working together as a single service to provide the best outcomes for Middlesbrough's children.

Children's Care and Education and Partnerships and sat within the Children's Services directorate.

The following Services sat within Children's Care, headed by the Director of Children's Care:-

- Early Help – Preventative work undertaken with children and families. A shift towards more work being done at Early Help level had been identified as part of the ongoing improvement journey which was a positive sign as it meant more children and families were being helped at an earlier stage before issues increased to crisis point and statutory interventions were required. Caseloads within Early Help were currently quite high so positioning of resources needed to be monitored. An Early Help Strategy was in place.
- Multi Agency Children's Hub (MACH) – First point of contact for all agencies where there was a concern about a child or young person. All contacts were filtered and measured against the threshold of need to determine where the referral should be directed. Some would be referred to Early Help and those considered to require social care intervention would be referred to the Assessment Service.
- Assessment Service – The function of this Service was to assess the situation with the family by carrying out a Single Assessment within 45 days from the point of referral. The assessment would determine whether any further action was needed, whether the case could be stepped

down to Early Help or whether the family required more significant help. Where more significant help was needed, the family could be directed through the following routes:-

- Child in Need – Middlesbrough currently had two managed Innovate Teams who were taking on a significant amount of Children in Need work. The target timescale for completing work with Children in Need was 12 weeks.
- Safeguarding and Care Planning – Where a case was considered to be more serious or significant risks were identified within the family, it would be moved to this Service. This Service worked with children on Child Protection plans and it was highlighted that the numbers of children on Child Protection plans had started to reduce slightly, with a shift towards more Early Help provision. Safeguarding and Care Planning was also the area with legal expertise and determined whether applications for Court Orders, including Care Orders, should be made. This was a very skilled area of work requiring Social Workers to go into the Court arena, being well-prepared.
- Children Looked After – Consisted of three teams. The numbers of children looked after had significantly reduced – from 702 in August 2020 to 531 in July 2021.
- Care Leavers (Pathways) – From the age of 18 children were no longer considered 'looked after' but were supported through the Care Leavers Team. The Team's practitioners ensured that young people were supported into education, employment and training. A CAMHS worker was situated within the team and was making a difference to young people's lives. Many young people needed support between the ages of 18 – 25 which was provided by this team.
- Independent Reviewing Officers – This was a Team of Officers who reviewed all children who were looked after children on a regular basis – generally every six months. This provided an assurance mechanism to ensure children were happy and thriving in their placement.
- Adoption – Adoption work was mainly undertaken with Adoption Tees Valley – the Regional Adoption Agency. Children's Services worked with the children who were being recommended for adoption, whilst ATV was responsible for assessing adopters. Children's Services and ATV matched the children with suitable adopters together and the Executive Director was also the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) who made the final decision as to whether a child should be placed for adoption and then as to whether the match was suitable to proceed, following the recommendations made by the Adoption Panel.
- Children With Disabilities Team and Short Break Service
- Residential Children's Homes – Middlesbrough was fortunate to still have internal residential provision (as not all local authorities did). More recently, a nine-bed supported lodgings accommodation was opened at Daniel Court for care leavers prior to moving to independent living.
- Strategic Services - Led by the Head of Strategic Services, this Team was responsible for the planning, monitoring and preparation of key information for various bodies such as the Children's Improvement Board and inspections.

The following Services sat within Education and Partnerships, led by the Director of Education and Partnerships:-

- Provision of support to schools in Middlesbrough, including 11 maintained primary schools (all other primary schools in Middlesbrough and all of its secondary schools were academies).
- Virtual School – ensuring that the best interests of children looked after were upheld in school.
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) – Support for children with SEND, including maintenance of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP). This service worked closely with

Children's Social Care and the Virtual School. Support was also provided to vulnerable children, for example, those who had been excluded from school or children who were not achieving as expected.

- Community Learning – further education programmes and support.
- Youth Offending Service – Operating across the south tees area.

The Executive Director highlighted that relationships between schools and Children's Services had improved immensely during the pandemic which was promising.

The Panel heard that the following were priorities for 2021/22 within Children's Services:-

- Covid Recovery – continuing to work through Covid to improve services.
- Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers – Children's Services currently had a high proportion of agency staff and it was recognised that a stable workforce was key to sustaining improvement. One of the main strands of the Workforce Development Strategy was recruitment and retention, looking at how to make Middlesbrough's Children's Services an employer of choice.
- Use of finance – A good deal of work had been done on demand forecasting – identifying what was needed to provide services. Once a stable status was achieved in terms of workforce and a move towards more preventative work being undertaken, budgets would need to be brought in-line.
- Variability of Practice – A key theme throughout Ofsted visits and inspections was variability of practice. It was acknowledged that Children's Services had good practice in some areas but this needed to be levelled up across the service and be consistently good.
- Partnership Working – Essential within the directorate, corporately and with external partners such as Health, Police, Schools, other Local Authorities.
- Vulnerable Children – To look at young people who were missing and/or at risk of criminal exploitation. The Futures for Families Hub worked with families on the edge of care and a Vulnerable Adolescents Strategy had been produced, exploring how to work with and best support those vulnerable young people who were at a critical point in their lives.
- Overarching all of the above was the Improvement Plan. The plan was refreshed each time there was a visit/inspection by Ofsted or the Children's Commissioner.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- The Executive Director was asked to provide clarification around the term 'maintained primary schools'. The Panel was informed that a maintained school was one that was still run by the local authority. Many schools had now moved out to become academies and operated independently, with some schools belonging to multi-academy trusts made up of several schools. Whilst the local authority had some influence on academies, they operated under their own rules.
- It was queried how many children the Youth Offending Service worked with. The Executive Director advised that it was a South Tees Service operated in partnership with Redcar and Cleveland and worked well. The Executive Director did not have the figures to hand but would provide the Middlesbrough figures to the Panel in due course.
- Reference was made to the occupation of Daniel Court and it was confirmed that there was currently eight young people residing there with a ninth person due to move in. It was also confirmed that the accommodation was supported.

- It was queried how many children were receiving short break support. Again the Executive Director advised that she would provide the Panel with those figures in due course.

The Panel wished to place on record their thanks to all staff working within Children's Services for their hard work and continued efforts in supporting the improvement journey. The Executive Director advised that she would convey this to staff at her next staff briefing meeting.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

SETTING THE PANEL'S WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2021/22

The Democratic Services Officer submitted a report inviting the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel to consider its work programme for 2021/22.

A list of potential topics, which were anticipated to be of particular interest to the Scrutiny Panel, and the suggestions received in respect of the Scrutiny Panel's remit were contained in the report.

Members were advised that the topical issues and suggestions outlined in the report were merely proposals and the content of the work programme was entirely a decision for the Panel to make.

The Panel was encouraged to select two topics where scrutiny could make an impact, add value or contribute to policy development.

The Panel was reminded that it could also identify shorter 'one-off' topics and receive any relevant updates throughout the year as it considered necessary.

Paragraph 11 of the report set out the key considerations when agreeing to include a specific topic on the work programme. The Panel's chosen topics for inclusion on its Work Programme would be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Board on 28 July 2021 for approval.

The Panel held a discussion in relation to the suggested topics within the report and selected the following topics for the inclusion in the Panel's Work Programme:-

Full Review topics:-

1. Locality Working (in the context of Children's Services).
2. PACE bed provision.

Update on previous review

1. Early Help - To receive an update on the latest position following the Panel's review of Early Help in 2019.

Task and Finish

1. Small task and finish groups to undertake visits to various service areas within Children's Services, on a regular basis and to feedback information to the Scrutiny Panel.

Regular Updates

1. Ofsted/Children's Commissioner – continue to receive regular updates regarding visits, inspections and findings of Ofsted and the Children's Commission and progress on the Children's Services improvement journey.
2. Covid Recovery – continue to receive updates as and when appropriate in relation to Covid recovery in Children's Services.

AGREED that the topics, as listed above, be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Board for approval and inclusion in the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel's work programme for 2021/2022.

UPDATE – OFSTED FOCUSED VISIT TO CHILDREN'S SERVICES

The Executive Director provided the Panel with a presentation in relation to the Ofsted Focused Visit to Children's Services that took place on 26 and 27 May 2021. A copy of the Ofsted letter, dated 15 July 2021, detailing its full findings from the visit, had been circulated with the agenda prior to the meeting, for information.

To provide context to the focused visit, Ofsted's overall aim was "How has England's social care system delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the pandemic?" For Middlesbrough, this meant how this was delivered whilst continuing to improve.

The focused visit used the same methodology as for the November/December 2019 inspection, looking across the whole of Children's Services. The visit was undertaken by four Social Care Inspectors and one Education Inspector, who were 'on site' for two days, however, prior to being on site, Children's Services supplied requested documentation and performance information and key personnel were also interviewed.

In relation to Covid, the strategic findings were as follows:-

- Leaders invoked their major incident plan swiftly and effectively (corporately).
- A framework for identifying and monitoring vulnerably children in their communities was established.
- Opportunities for different ways of working were brought about across the Council as well as revitalising partnerships.
- Weekly communications meetings with strategic partners were held to establish multi agency pathways – for example Domestic Abuse pathway (this had been nationally evaluated), and school networks.
- Successful progress on much of the Improvement Programme but some elements inevitably effected by Covid.

The findings in relation to Covid from a practice perspective were:-

- Some Social Workers were creative and persistent in their engagement with children despite restrictions imposed by lockdown.
- Staff had benefitted from Covid-safe working practices and technology to support engagement with children and families.
- Despite the challenges of last year, staff reported feeling supported and liked working for Middlesbrough and understood the vision for change.
- The numbers of Electively Home Educated (EHE) children increased during the pandemic, however, Children's Services had effective systems in place to monitor electively home educated (EHE) children.

In terms of Leadership, Ofsted found that Leaders were positively engaged in a comprehensive programme of improvement and introduced:-

- Audit to Excellence Framework – a comprehensive plan measuring quality of practice through auditing.
- 'Non-negotiables' Practice Standards – expectations of how Social Workers should work using core standards.

Ofsted also found that Children's Services had:-

- Appropriately prioritised recruitment and the development of the Workforce Strategy.

- Recognised the variability in practice which was not meeting their own expectations regarding quality of practice.
- Did not yet have a sufficient understanding of children who were missing education. (This applied to a small cohort of children)

The Panel was informed that the main overall findings were:-

- Demand for Children's Social Care Services had increased over the last year.
- The MACH had continued to improve.
- Caseloads were reducing but remained too high for some Social Workers.
- Children were seen regularly and direct work was making a demonstrable difference to their lives.
- Workers were persistent and built good relationships with children so that interventions were more effective.
- Personal Advisers maintained regular contact with care leavers.
- There was effective partnership work to identify exploitation risks and trends.
- Social Workers were increasingly working with children who had multiple and complex needs. This was as a result of a legacy of poor practice.

Ofsted also identified the following areas for improvement:-

- Quality of assessments and plans was variable and management oversight and supervision was not suitably evaluative. (Oversight was currently more directive and needed to develop to include more evaluation of the work being undertaken).
- Children came into care when they needed to but there was some delay in finding the right homes for them.
- Lack of suitable foster placements and children's homes. (This was both internal and external and it was highlighted that Middlesbrough was trying to develop internal provision).
- Too many care leavers were not in education, employment or training.
- Children's identities and diverse needs were not given sufficient consideration. (This was not only in relation to ethnicity and culture, but about working with the whole child, for example, did the child have a particular health need, or mental health need).
- Some children experienced too many changes of Social Worker. Children told inspectors they would like to have Social Workers that stayed with them for a long time.

In relation to education matters, there was a significant focus on children missing education. Ofsted found that there were effective systems in place to monitor electively home educated (EHE) children. However, Children's Services had insufficient knowledge of the circumstances of vulnerable children who were missing education so that their needs were not being met. This included a small cohort of children looked after who were on a reduced timetable or who had experienced no education for too long; some children with special education needs did not receive a school placed within the 20 day timescale; and, a very small number of the aforementioned children attended unregistered provision on a part time basis as their sole provision.

Finally, Ofsted had made two new recommendations, as follows:-

- Management oversight and actions to ensure that vulnerable children and children in care, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), received their full educational entitlement.
- The understanding of identity and the diverse needs of children and their families to inform assessment, planning and support.

Overall, it was a positive outcome showing that Children's Services 'knew themselves' and what needed to be done.

In terms of the next steps, the Children's Commissioner was in the process of finalising his 12-month review report to the Minister, having been with Children's Services during the week commencing 12 July 2021. This report would be brought to the Panel once it was available. It was also expected that a further Ofsted Monitoring Visit would take place towards the end of the year/start of next year.

A discussion ensued and the following issues were raised:-

- Reference was made to the finding that 'there was a lack of suitable foster placements' and it was queried what was being done to try and rectify this. The Executive Director advised that recruitment of foster carers was a continuous process but it was acknowledged that there had been a net loss of foster carers over the last year partly due to different ways of working being introduced which had led to some carers, regrettably, resigning. In addition, there was also a shortage of external independent (IFA) foster placements and residential placements. Whilst the number of children looked after had reduced in Middlesbrough, other local authorities were seeing a rise in numbers, making external placements more difficult to source. Children's Services had also had some success in bringing children from external provision into internal provision and continued to try and build its own internal residential provision, including the opening of Daniel Court and the refurbishment of an existing residential home which would soon be available again for placements. It was highlighted that some children looked after had very complex and specific needs which often meant they required specialist placements which were more expensive.
- Reference was made to the Ofsted findings that 'children are seen regularly and direct work is making a demonstrable difference to their lives' and 'the quality of assessments and plans is variable', and it was queried how the two correlated and whether it was a 'paperwork' issue. The Executive Director explained that particularly in the longer term teams, Social Workers built up relationships with children and were often better at understanding children than they were at writing it down. Assessments and plans needed to be more reflective. Other reasons for the variability of assessments and plans could include caseloads, the numbers of newly qualified social workers, turnover, handover of work and training opportunities and standards needed to be implemented. This was one of the reasons for continual audit to assess improvements in practice.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

UPDATE - COVID RECOVERY - CHILDREN'S SERVICES

The 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 in the week commencing 17 July 2021, in Middlesbrough, there were 1,396 Covid cases per 100,000 population, this had reduced to 790 per 100,000 as of week commencing 26 July 2021, however the numbers were still high.

Whilst schools had encountered a difficult time with an increase in positive cases leading up to the summer holiday, a programme of holiday enrichment activities was taking place in a number of secondary schools.

It was highlighted that there had been an increase in instances of covid amongst children and young people. Between March and July 2021 the following numbers had been confirmed:-

- Age 5-9 – 545 cases
- Age 10-14 – 947 cases

- Age 15-19 – 1,512 cases
- Age 20-24 – 2,093 (this was the highest figure across all age groups from 0-90)

In relation to Covid in schools, it was reported that in September 2020, 45 staff had tested positive across Middlesbrough schools and this increased to 59 in July 2021. The number of school pupils that tested positive was 74 in September 2020, increasing to 310 by July 2021.

The numbers of school staff isolating in September 2020 was 25, rising to 144 by July 2021 and the number of pupils self-isolating was 290 in September increasing to 1,750 in July 2021.

Social Workers were still meeting children and families face to face whilst ensuring covid safety measures were followed.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

PROPOSED SCHEDULE OF MEETING DATES FOR THE 2021/22 MUNICIPAL YEAR

A proposed schedule of meeting dates for Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel for the 2021/22 Municipal Year was submitted for the Panel's consideration.

AGREED that the proposed meeting schedule for 2021/22 be approved with the exception of the proposed date of 18 April 2022 being moved to Tuesday, 26 April 2022 at 4.00pm.