

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 21 September 2021.

PRESENT: Councillor Uddin (Chair Pro-Tem), Councillors: Davison, Higgins, Mawston, Nugent and Wilson.

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

An APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE was submitted on behalf of Councillor J Walker.

APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR (PRO-TEM)

Due to the recent resignation of the Chair and Vice Chair of the Scrutiny Panel, nominations were sought for a Chair Pro-tem. It was clarified that the appointment of Chair and Vice Chair to the Scrutiny Panel would be made by Full Council on 22 September 2021.

Nominations were submitted and seconded. A vote was taken and Councillor Uddin was duly appointed as Chair Pro-tem.

**** 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 27 July 2021 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

INTRODUCTION TO NEW SCRUTINY TOPIC – LOCALITY WORKING FROM A CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERSPECTIVE

S Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services, and G Field, Director of Environment and Community Services, were in attendance to provide the Panel with an introduction to the Panel's new scrutiny topic 'Locality Working from a Children's Services Perspective'.

The Director of Environment and Community Services provided a presentation to accompany the report previously circulated with the agenda, giving a flavour of what locality working was and the current arrangements.

The Panel heard that Locality Working was a new way of working in which the local authority delivered services in partnership with other organisations and the community in which it was based. The Council's Executive approved proposals, on 8 October 2019, to implement locality working in two pilot areas – Newport and North Ormesby. The rationale behind selecting the two areas was detailed in the submitted report.

Evidence showed that there were many benefits of having multi-agency teams working from a single location within the community it served, including:-

- reduction in the number of referrals
- improved information sharing
- increased pro-activeness and intervention at an earlier stage
- improved access for the local community with one single reference/contact point for advice/services
- raised morale and awareness within the community

In terms of improving the lives of children and young people and their families within the pilot areas, locality working aimed to:-

- Increase detailed understanding of the needs of children and young people across the Council and partner organisations.
- Better understanding of the needs of children within those communities across the Council.
- Understand the key influences and inter-relationships that affect children's lives within those communities.
- Engage children and young people in the development of their community.
- Provide support and services for young people from within their locality where possible, in line with demand.
- Increase awareness and knowledge of support available to children and young people within the community.

The over-arching objectives of locality working included: improving public perception within both localities – making residents feel safer; reducing recorded crime and anti-social behaviour; improving outcomes for children, young people and their families; improving the physical environment; building stronger communities; and making the population healthier.

The Panel was informed that locality working in the pilot areas had been delayed by approximately one year due to Covid, however, some demand modelling had been undertaken and initial resources had been identified. This would be kept under review and monitored and was detailed in the report.

The total number of staff identified to work within the Newport locality team was 43 and 24 for North Ormesby. The Locality Work Teams would be made up of local authority staff from Environment, Community Safety, Public Protection, Education EMAT, Adult Social Care, Early Help Team, Children's Social Care, Revenues and Benefits; Public Health and partner agencies including Thirteen Housing, and Cleveland Police.

The Locality Working Team for Newport would be based at the Co-operative Buildings, Linthorpe Road and the North Ormesby Team would be based at the North Ormesby Hub. It was hoped that teams would move into their new accommodation by October 2021.

Action plans for each pilot locality had been developed between all partners and a range of formal working groups had been established, including: daily joint Police briefings; joint multi-agency patrols and visits and monthly meetings of a vulnerable adults group, children and families group, environmental working group, making people feel safe meetings and a community resilience group involving voluntary and community groups.

The Panel was advised that, in summary, the Council had a vision for locality working and a key driver was to work jointly with partners to deliver significant benefits. Some demand modelling had been undertaken and some level of locality working had already commenced. Staff would start to move into the new locality accommodation in October. The approach to locality working would be monitored and refined where appropriate and the impact of the pilots would start to become apparent within the next six to seven months.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel Member queried whether additional staffing would need to be provided by the Council for the locality hubs. In response it was stated that this was currently an unknown, however, the benefits of collective working should include increased output with improved service delivery in those areas with a long term goal of reducing demand. In terms of Children's Services, it was anticipated that the Social Workers based in the pilot areas would specialise in working in those communities and their caseloads would eventually be made up of cases from within the locality only. The benefits of this would be that Social Workers would get to know the area and the people enabling stronger relationships. In essence the work would remain but would be distributed in a different way.

- In response to a query regarding engaging with children and young people, it was confirmed that it would be crucial for young people's voices to be heard in order to know their needs and wishes. There would be a range of engagement activity depending on the issues being explored but it was anticipated that this would include outreach work and focus groups to gain a better understanding on a broader level. A Panel Member commented that he had spoken to groups of youths congregating within his own Ward to ask what they would like to see in the area and many had expressed an interest in seeing a boxing club. The Director responded that Street Wardens, Community Protection and Police were working closely together to come up with solutions to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour and part of that would be to engage with young people to help shape their communities.
- In terms of rolling out locality working to other areas, the Panel was advised that the pilots in Newport and North Ormesby were approximately one year behind schedule due to Covid, however, the pilots would be evaluated and if it was working as well as anticipated, the model would be rolled out at some stage in the future.

The Chair thanked the Director for his presentation and the information provided.

AGREED that the information provided be noted and considered in the context of the Panel's new scrutiny review 'Locality Working from a Children's Services Perspective'.

UPDATE – 12 MONTH REVIEW REPORT OF THE CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER INTO CHILDREN'S SERVICES

The Executive Director of Children's Services provided the Panel with an update in relation to the Commissioner's 12 month review report into Children's Services.

A copy of the full report had been circulated with the agenda prior to the meeting for information and the Executive Director provided the Panel with a presentation in relation to the key headlines from the report.

It was highlighted that the Commissioner's report was submitted to the Minister in August 2021. A decision had been expected from the Minister by 15 September, however, this had been delayed due to a Government restructure and a new Minister, Will Quince MP, had been appointed on 16 September.

The Executive Director provided background information for newer Members of the Panel, including a timeline of events from the Ofsted inspection in November/December 2019, to the present time.

It was explained that the 12-month review took place during the week 12 – 16 July 2021. The Commissioner viewed a range of strategic documentation; held interviews with key leaders and political leaders; hosted a range of focus groups looking at vital areas including quality assurance, performance, workforce development, practice and partnership working; held discussions with the DfE Adviser, Independent Chair of the Improvement Board, Chair of Safeguarding Arrangements and LGA staff supporting the authority. The Commissioner shared his findings with key personnel and structured his report against the key enablers for improvement.

The Commissioner's analysis of key areas yielded the following findings:-

Leadership and Management

- Credible leadership team
- Impressive and sophisticated understanding of demand and future progressions
- 'Middlesbrough Children Matter' branding appeared to be providing an ambitious catalyst for change
- Leaders were more involved on a regional level
- Significant political leadership changes could destabilise progress.

A Member of the Panel expressed concern that instability in political leadership may destabilise future progress of the improvement journey and hoped that the situation could be resolved quickly. The Executive Director advised that discussions had been held with the Mayor and Chief Executive and that political leaders needed to be fully supported in order to achieve stability and minimise risk.

Strategic Partnership Approach

- Effective Improvement Board – with recent engagement of new members (including voluntary organisations and Thirteen Housing).
- Appointment of the Chair of Safeguarding Partnership bringing energy and enthusiasm.
- Leadership culture and possibly Covid have brought partners closer together and enhanced engagement with external bodies.
- The MACH continued to sustain improvements and make additional improvement.
- There were opportunities to move away from historical narrative and to resolve issues around Police contacts through ongoing debate.

Workforce

- Trusted relationships between staff and senior and middle management levels and positive feedback from frontline staff on visible, credible leadership.
- Impressive Strategic Workforce Development Strategy with exceptional modelling work (eg planning levels of staff required as practice improved).
- Good Learning and Development Programme with flexibility.
- Plans to enhance recruitment and retention coming to fruition.
- Some progress with staffing but still too many agency staff.
- The Annual Health check provided mixed reading – feedback scores from staff were lower around workloads, access to regular and reflective supervision and understanding of the practice model.
- Some reduction in caseloads but some teams remained above desired levels and were behind the pace.

Practice Improvement and Innovation

- Development of Strategies including Early Help Strategy, Learning and Education Strategy, Corporate Parenting Strategy – incorporating the Permanence Strategy which the Commissioner commented had made considerable progress in tracking and oversight of children in the care system leading to impressive performance in timely moves for children to their forever homes.
- Highly impressive Audit to Excellence programme.
- Investment in Youth Services (one of the few local authorities to do this).
- Models for enhancing and integrating provision at a local level.
- The Practice Model was clear, well communicated and better understood.
- Partnership in Practice model with North Yorkshire.
- Are there too many referral processes? Looking at a single referral model to avoid duplication and delay.
- Are there too many initiatives? Potentially distracting and should be avoided – progress would be made by doing more of the same.

The Commissioner found that there were examples of impressive performance during the last year, including:-

- Timeliness of assessments had improved from 76% to 95%.
- Numbers of Children Looked After had reduced from 702 (August 2020) to 539.
- There was an increase of 42% in Early Help cases, with evidence to show that 78% had been closed with positive outcomes.

The Commissioner also found that 22% of practice remained inadequate, although practice was improving; Family Group Conference numbers were too low and the FGC model was not fully embedded; re-referral rates were too high.

A summary of the Commissioner's recommendations was provided as follows:-

- Need to move into an ambitious medium term financial plan (MTFP) to fund activity pro-actively rather than reactively.
- Further reduction in caseloads needed whilst maintaining and embedding high quality activity and avoiding distraction by new initiatives.
- Planned new members of the Improvement Board and increased joint activity between the Improvement Board and Safeguarding Partnerships must be implemented.
- Political leadership arrangements needed to be enhanced, with additional capacity and training for key roles. The Mayor was asked to provide an update to the DfE by the end of October 2021.
- Less reliance on agency staffing. The MTFP must create a detailed timeline for progressing this.
- Work to increase reflective supervision and focus on quality of practice was needed.
- More local high quality placements and greater placement choice to support children to returning to Middlesbrough was needed. Planned enhancements to residential placements must be matched by skilled, stable staffing to care for those with complex needs.
- Reduce complexity of accessing commissioned or directly delivered services for frontline staff. Allow speedy access to meet children's needs.
- Performance challenges highlighted in the report must be prioritised.
- Ambition to locate improvements in Children's Services in the context of wider improvements for all children needs to translate into effective delivery routes. (For example, could the Middlesbrough Children Matter branding be rolled out to all children in Middlesbrough and to partners?)

The next steps would be to receive the Minister's decision and reflect on any additional recommendations. The full report would be circulated with a communication thanking staff for their hard work. The Improvement Plan would be reviewed and revised to incorporate the additional recommendations from the Commissioner and from Ofsted which would then be presented to the Improvement Board for endorsement. It was anticipated that the next Ofsted monitoring visit was likely to be in the New Year.

The Chair thanked the Executive Director for her presentation. The Panel acknowledged that whilst there was further work to be done, the Commissioner's report was positive and that staff should be thanked for their hard work towards improving services for children in Middlesbrough.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

UPDATE - COVID RECOVERY - CHILDREN'S SERVICES

The Executive Director of Children's Services advised that there were no significant issues to report. Pupils had returned to school following undertaking two supervised lateral flow tests and were asked to undertake two lateral flow tests at home every week. Children's Services was not currently affected by high Covid sickness levels.

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 28 July and 8 September 2021, namely:-

28 July 2021

- Executive forward work programme
- Update from Children's Services in relation to financial pressures.
- Scrutiny Panels' Work Programme report (approval of all Panels' work programmes).
- Scrutiny Panels' Chair's Updates.

8 September 2021

- Executive Member update - Attendance by the Mayor
- Scrutiny Panels' Chair's Updates.
- Final Report – Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel – Behaviour, Discipline and Bullying in Schools.
- Executive Forward Work Programme
- Chief Executive's Update

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, 11 October 2021 at 4.00pm.