

**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 November 2021.**

**PRESENT:** Councillor Davison (Chair), Councillor Mawston (Vice Chair); Councillors: Hellaoui, Nugent, Uddin, J Walker and Wilson.

**OFFICERS:** C Breheny, S Butcher, H Clark, J Dixon, G Earl, R Farnham, A Hill and A Parkinson.

**An APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE** was submitted on behalf of Councillor Higgins.

**\*\* DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

There were no Declarations of Interest made by Members at this point in the meeting.

**MINUTES – 25 OCTOBER 2021**

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel held on 25 October 2021 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

**LOCALITY WORKING FROM A CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERSPECTIVE – FURTHER INFORMATION**

A report had been circulated on behalf of the Executive Director of Children's Services, who was in attendance at the meeting to provide further information in relation to the Panel's current scrutiny topic 'Locality Working from a Children's Services Perspective'. It was intended that the format of the meeting would be more discussion-based and, subsequently, a number of Officers were in attendance, as follows: R Farnham, Director of Children's Care; G Earl, Head of Prevention; H Clark, Team Manager (Early Help); A Hill, Team Manager (Social Care) and A Parkinson, Newport Neighbourhood Manager.

The submitted report provided further details specifically in relation to the Children's Services element of the locality working projects.

The Panel was advised that Stronger Families, or 'Early Help', had three Senior Practitioners working in the two localities – two in Newport and one in North Ormesby. This had been the case for the past year.

It was explained that any referrals requiring early help support in Newport and North Ormesby were received via the Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH), the 'front door' of Children's Services (in the same way referrals were received across the whole of Middlesbrough) and allocated immediately to those Practitioners working within those localities. Sometimes cases were 'stepped down' to early help services from Social Work teams where social care intervention was no longer required but some form of additional support was still needed. It was highlighted that when early help staff in the localities had high caseloads, the cases were allocated to other staff across the service. Team Managers and Assistant Managers worked hard to try to avoid this happening.

Demand for early help services across Middlesbrough was high. All families were referred in through the MACH and allocations were made every day so that families received a swift response – within three days.

In terms of the Social Care (Social Work) teams, initially one Social Worker was allocated to each of the localities, however, it was soon discovered that this was not sufficient. Resources had now been increased to three Social Workers linked to North Ormesby and two Social Workers linked to Newport.

Referrals to Social Care (statutory interventions) were also made via the MACH by professionals working with children or by families. Where the family was new to Social Care and did not already have a Social Worker, they would be assessed by the Assessment Service and where it was identified that more work was needed the family would transfer to the Safeguarding and Care Planning Service. If the family was located in Newport or North Ormesby they would be allocated to a Social Worker assigned to that locality. However, in order to avoid children having changes in Social Worker, there would be instances where children from Newport or North Ormesby would have Social Workers who were not attached to the localities. This would change as children's cases progressed so that there would be an eventual move towards consistency of social workers within the locality model.

The Panel was advised that the five Social Workers had previously been based across the service in various teams which had led to some pressures with case allocations and throughput. In order to better manage the situation, a single team had now been created with a single Team Manager responsible for a team of five Social Workers based across the two localities and a sixth Social Worker for additional capacity if needed. The priority over the coming weeks would be to allocate Newport and North Ormesby families to this team.

Early Help and Social Care staff worked closely together within the localities to ensure that any step up or step down of services was seamless and staff generally felt that locality working was a positive step with real benefits such as:-

- Joint visits with other professionals working in the same area
- Families in the respective localities recognising staff when they are in the locality
- Greater knowledge of the community and partners particularly with neighbourhood wardens and housing
- Improved relationships with schools in the locality as practitioners are working with children attending the same few schools and can therefore build up better relationships
- More effective use of professional time
- A reduction in mileage.

Examples of joint working were provided such as Officers from Community Development working with families alongside the EMAT Team, and also Street Wardens within the locality who were trusted and well known within the area and had been able to assist families with initial introductions to support services. In addition, it was highlighted that from a Stronger Families perspective, working closely with partners strengthened capacity as cases may become closed with Stronger Families but remain open with the appropriate support partner such as schools, health or neighbourhood safety team, and would be tracked and monitored. Partners would be involved in attending a multi-agency meeting alongside Stronger Families to complete a 'My Family Plan' assessment with families and those partners would also attend reviews. This ensured that the family received the right support and also continuity of the support and people working with them. This locality multi-agency approach was very beneficial to children and families.

The Panel was informed that there were some areas of the model that required further development, including:-

- Working virtually due to the Covid pandemic had made it more difficult to get to know other partners, however, locality teams were now returning to offices and partnership working was improving.
- From an Early Help perspective, staff felt that there were not enough early help staff assigned to the localities to manage the high demand which could result in cases being allocated outside of the locality teams. It was noted that once early help cases were closed, they could be referred back into the service and would be allocated to the same locality practitioner for continuity and this could increase locality practitioners' caseloads.
- The Social Care One Team approach was still new and embedding but it was anticipated that this would ease pressures on locality Social Workers in terms of caseloads.

- The expectation and understanding of referral pathways for statutory social work intervention sometimes created a barrier as the locality approach had led to an expectation that when issues were identified, a Social Worker would become involved. However, this was not always the case and it was important to ensure that where issues were identified, the right level of practitioner became involved so that work with families was at the appropriate level for their needs.
- The weekly multi-disciplinary meetings for all practitioners working in the locality could be useful although the discussion often focussed to a large extent on the environment, however, a sub group was to be established focussing on children and families.

The submitted report provided details of the number of caseloads open to Stronger Families practitioners in both localities, by the number of children on caseload, number of families on caseload and the number of children open on caseload for less than six months.

In North Ormesby, the Senior Practitioner had 34 children on caseload from 14 families and 22 children whose cases had been open for less than six months.

In Newport, the two Senior Practitioners respectively had 29 and 28 children on caseload from 14 and 13 families and 16 and 20 children whose cases had been open for less than six months.

In relation to Social Care, it was highlighted that all Social Workers across the town were allocated no more than 25 children each. As some of the locality Social Workers were still working with families outside of their localities, and some non-locality workers had cases within the localities, it was not yet possible to provide a true breakdown of caseloads for social workers within the localities.

Quotes from a Senior Practitioner and from a family that was being helped were shared with the Panel. The Practitioner stated that they felt the locality concept worked well and they would not want to go back to 'town-wide' working. The family was positive about the practitioner they had been working with stating that they were nice to talk to and had brought the child out of themselves. Support was well received and everything was going well. The parent had stated that the support had helped with their depression and that they were now working and had a nice house and no longer struggled to get out of bed.

The Panel was advised that Covid had impacted on the introduction of the locality working model, however, weekly virtual meetings were held in order to develop action plans with strategic level aims within the model. Data emerging from the second year of the model's operation was beginning to show benefits on a wider scale, including a reduction in anti-social behaviour, reduction in long term empty properties and providing a sense of community as residents got to know staff working within the locality team. It also provided an opportunity for wider community development in terms of ongoing discussion with residents regarding issues and challenges within the ward. The locality pilot had been positive on the whole and was developing and improving continually.

Discussion ensued and the following issues were raised:-

- Reference was made to issues regarding data protection in the past with multi-agency working and it was queried whether this was an issue with locality working. The Panel was advised that partners within the model had signed up to an over-arching information sharing agreement and all information was shared appropriately.
- Clarification was sought in relation to the weekly multi-agency meetings where reference was made to a focus on the environment. The Panel was informed that feedback from staff was that a lot of information discussed at those meetings was around anti-social behaviour, crime etc. The meetings gave all of the partners a better understanding of all the ongoing issues in the locality and this was relatively new to Early Help Practitioners and Social Workers, however it

did provide a better understanding of the issues on a wider scale and allowed them to recognise how they might impact on families.

- In response to a query in relation to the data on caseloads, it was clarified that the number of caseloads for 'children under six months' did not refer to the child's age but to the length of time the case had been open to Stronger Families. Data was closely monitored so the impact being made on families could be regularly examined.
- In response to a further question in relation to the data, it was confirmed that it could be broken down by various demographics, such as the child's age, gender, ethnicity, etc.
- A Panel Member asked how families were kept informed of any other agencies that became involved with supporting them. It was explained that a 'My Family Plan' review would take account of all agencies and professionals involved with the family. The Early Help Practitioner co-ordinated this and it meant that families did not have to keep re-telling their story and the involvement of other agencies/partners would be tailored to meet the family's needs. Children within the family would also give their views around how they were feeling at that time and if they felt there were too many professionals involved with them, this would be documented in the My Family Plan and reviews and tailored accordingly. All of the review meetings involved the families and children and some children chaired their own reviews. All work was very child-focused to ensure the voice of the child was heard throughout.
- Reference was made to high demand across Middlesbrough and it was queried how many cases were allocated on a daily basis and how the numbers of allocations in other wards compared with the allocations for Newport and North Ormesby and whether this data would be used to determine any potential future roll out of the locality model to other areas of the town. It was explained that the areas of Newport and North Ormesby were chosen for the locality working pilot due to a number of data sets – including anti-social behaviour, crime, children's services involvement and deprivation – and the localities were chosen on the basis of overall need and this reflected the partners brought into the teams and the resource allocations. It was confirmed that the end of the pilot period was March 2022 and that a report would be prepared including recommendations going forward. It was possible, for example, that not every ward required a full locality working programme and the model had the potential to be adapted to be shared across wards or to operate differently in some areas. The Executive Director stated that she would welcome feedback from Members on how they felt it might work better or differently across the town and that their opinions were valuable as they were well placed to understand and know their own communities.
- In terms of referrals into Children's Services, this had increased across the whole town over the last year. Children's services had a sophisticated understanding and analysis of demand across Middlesbrough and this could be broken down by ward. The number of referrals for Newport and North Ormesby could be compared with other parts of the town and this information could be provided to the Panel in the future.
- Reference was made to Social Care staff and it was queried how many Social Workers had left the authority. The Panel was informed that Children's Services was always looking to recruit permanent social workers and that Middlesbrough currently had a high percentage of agency Social Workers. A recruitment campaign was currently under development that would provide incentives to attract Social Workers to Middlesbrough, making it an employer of choice. Generally there was still some capacity with agency Social Workers to try and keep caseloads down. Middlesbrough needed to recruit Social Workers with at least 2-3 years' experience in order to gradually reduce the number of agency staff. Recruiting experienced Social Workers was a regional and national problem. It was important to have the right balance of newly qualified and experienced Social Workers and the Workforce Development Strategy aimed to address this outlining the support, learning and development that could be expected by coming to work for Middlesbrough, with manageable caseloads which had reduced over the course of the improvement journey.

- In response to a query regarding how high caseload levels were in Early Help, it was explained that caseloads were always slightly higher than Social Care caseloads as early help staff had a different job role and remit. So whilst they looked high they were still at a manageable level and had started to reduce. The ideal number of caseloads for an Early Help Practitioner was around 25-26, so the caseloads in Newport and North Ormesby were slightly high, however, when the number of families they were working with was considered, this was lower because some families had sibling groups and Practitioners worked with all children within the family therefore the caseloads were not of concern.
- It was queried how working with BAME and non-English speaking families was managed. It was confirmed that Social Workers and Early Help Practitioners had easy access to an interpretation service that could accompany them on visits or help with telephone calls to ensure that language was not a barrier to the support available.
- Reference was made to apprenticeships within Children's Services and the Panel was advised that there were apprentice opportunities across the service and that some internal staff had been supported in completing a Social Work degree and that this was actively encouraged.
- It was queried how the team had found working with schools and whether children who needed help had been identified and were being supported within school. The Team Manager stated that the team had close contact with schools across the town and that a lot of work took place within schools within the localities and relationships were beginning to develop.
- Reference was made to the quotes provided in the report and Officers were asked whether regular feedback was sought from service users. The Early Help Team Manager advised that from an early help perspective, when a case was closed, an independent person from within the service, contacted the family and asked questions as a result of the work that had been done with them. The feedback was provided to the appropriate member of staff which was used to recognise the good work that they were doing and also to identify any areas of development or learning that might be required.
- It was questioned how many community groups worked with the locality teams. The Panel was advised that one of the benefits of the model was that it placed the community as a partner and work was undertaken to identify community groups and larger community assets. There was a diverse local offer in relation to social action and youth provision. Annual community surveys would be undertaken and the data would be used to inform the priorities within the locality. The Community Asset mapping had identified what young people's priorities were within the ward and there was a great deal of community action ongoing. There was a weekly stakeholder meeting with community groups and charities that shared information around activity in the ward.
- It was queried what the cost implications would be of rolling out the model to other areas and what indicators would be examined to determine where those areas would be. Identifying areas for potential future roll out of the model would be determined using a similar to identifying Newport and North Ormesby. The pilot projects would help identify how resources were best placed and evaluation of the current pilot would be key.

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

**AGREED** as follows:-

1. That the information provided by noted and considered in the context of the Panel's current scrutiny topic.
2. That representatives from a range of partners working within the Locality Teams be invited to the Panel's next meeting.

## **UPDATE – COVID RECOVERY IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

The Executive Director of Children's Services advised that there was little to report other than Council staff were due to reoccupy offices from 1 December 2021 on a 60:40 office/home working basis.

**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 9 November 2021, namely:-

- Executive forward work programme
- Update from the Executive Member for Environment, Finance & Governance
- Chief Executive's Update
- Scrutiny Panels' Chair's Updates.
- Final Report – Economic Development, Environment & Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel – Middlesbrough Regeneration Post Covid-19.

**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, 13 December 2021 at 4.00pm.

## **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

The Vice Chair raised the matter of a news report that had been published regarding research undertaken by the County Council Network which estimated that by 2025 there could be a 30% rise of the number of children in care. It was queried whether this was the predicted trend for Middlesbrough and how prepared we were for such an increase.

The Executive Director responded that in August 2019 Middlesbrough had 702 children looked after which was the second highest per 10,000 children in the country. One of the reasons for this was that children were not being moved to their forever homes quickly enough. A lot of work had been done since then but in many ways Middlesbrough was starting to buck the trend. The numbers of children looked after remained high compared with other parts of the country, but had reduced significantly. In terms of being prepared, Middlesbrough needed to continue to improve practice in order to continue to improve permanency and ensure the right resources were available in early help services.

The Director of Children's Care added that the national return made annually to the DfE had just been published which was why the report was pertinent. Middlesbrough's position had changed significantly in terms of the numbers of children looked after due to improvement. Nationally, children looked after numbers were increasing and the number of children becoming adopted was reducing, however, whilst it was recognised that numbers remained high in Middlesbrough, the number of children looked after had reduced by 23% over the last 12 months and the number of children becoming adopted had increased.

The Panel felt reassured and congratulated Children's Services on the hard work and improvements being made.

**NOTED**