

**Medway Council**  
**Meeting of Children and Young People Overview and**  
**Scrutiny Committee**

**Monday, 11 November 2019**

**6.30pm to 8.46pm**

**Record of the meeting**

**Subject to approval as an accurate record at the next meeting of this committee**

**Present:** Councillors: Kemp (Chairman), Opara (Vice-Chairman), Aldous, Cooper, Sylvia Griffin, Hackwell, Howcroft-Scott, Hubbard, Steve Iles, Johnson, Purdy, Thorne and Mrs Elizabeth Turpin

**Co-opted Members with voting rights on educational issues only:**

Fay Cordingley (Church of England Representative), Akinola Edun (Parent Governor Representative), David Lane (Parent Governor Representative) and Clive Mailing (Roman Catholic Church representative)

**Added members without voting rights:**

MYC Chairman (Medway Youth Council), MYC Cabinet Member (Medway Youth Council), Margaret Cane (Healthwatch Medway CIC Representative) and Nicola Forrest (Head Teacher Representative)

**Substitutes:**

Councillors:  
Carr (Substitute for Barrett)  
Fearn (Substitute for Ahmed)  
Price (Substitute for Mahil)

Lisa Scarrott (Substitute for Michelle Dewar – Medway Parents and Carers Forum)

**In Attendance:**

Vivien Bowles, Legal Advisor  
Jackie Brown, Head of Business Change (People) and ICT  
Jean Imray, Interim Assistant Director of Children's Social Care  
Stephen Platt, Democratic Services Officer  
Ian Sutherland, Director of People - Children and Adults Services

**424 Remembrance Day**

A minute silence was held for those present to reflect and remember.

**425 Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ahmed, Barrett and Mahil, and Michelle Dewar (Medway Parent and Carer Forum).

**426 Record of meeting**

The record of the meeting held on 3 October 2019 were agreed and signed as a true record.

**427 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances**

There were none.

**428 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping**

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

There were none.

Other interests

There were none.

**429 Call-in: Review of The Old Vicarage Children's Home Provision**

**Discussion:**

Councillor Johnson introduced the report, explaining the reasons behind the call in of Cabinet decisions 123/2019 and 124/2019, as set out in the report. He expressed concern that, following the Ofsted inspection of Medway's children's social care service in July 2019, which had rated the service as 'inadequate', the Council was proposing the closure of an outstanding provision. The Old Vicarage children's home has been a success for the current cohort of young people who have been placed there for four years. The report to Cabinet had indicated that there was a need for this provision and that spaces could be made available to others outside Medway, generating an income stream. There was also concern that, with the loss of the highly regarded staff at the home, it would be difficult to replace their particular skills. Therefore, closing the home would be counter intuitive.

Councillor Johnson recognised that the service should be allowed to evolve and considered that the nature of the Old Vicarage could be changed quickly by amending its Statement of Purpose. He expressed the view that the Council

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should be making a clear statement on its commitment to supporting Children's Services by allocating significant resources to facilitate service improvement.

In response, the Director of People – Children and Adults Services said that the current service model no longer met the more complex needs of service users and needed to be re-engineered for the children and young people who were currently presenting to the Council in need of statutory help. The Council needed to develop a provision to ensure that a greater number of young people received the right intervention at the right time. The changing profile of need no longer fitted the core purpose that the Old Vicarage was designed for and it was unable to meet this evolving demand.

The four young people currently residing at the Old Vicarage would soon reach the age of 18 when they would be required to leave. There was a reducing number of young people accommodated at the facility and, over the past 12 months, there had been a pattern of very short-term placements, some of which were around two weeks. Some young people had not been accommodated at the Old Vicarage because it had not been able to meet their specific needs or the nature of the risk they presented meant it would be an unsuitable option. It was therefore timely to consider future options. It was envisaged that future provision would include caring for an increasing number of young people in a family situation, such as Foster Care. Specifically trained Foster Carers with a more diverse range of skills could offer that provision.

The Director of People – Children and Adults Services praised the quality of staff at the Old Vicarage which had contributed to the outstanding status of the facility. Their skills in working with young people with difficulties was recognised and there would be opportunities for some staff to assist the proposals for future provision, providing support for children and young people before there was a need for them to be brought into residential care.

In response to questions from members of the Committee, officers made the following comments:

- If the Old Vicarage were to close in February 2020, steps would be taken to safeguard the building.
- It was envisaged that future provision would include the use of trained Foster Carers in emergency situations so that residential care for children and young people was only used in exceptional circumstances. There had been incidences of placements at the Old Vicarage breaking down very quickly.
- Changing the current Statement of Purpose of the Old Vicarage was likely to be a complicated process. Should the outcome of the consultation be to close the provision, various alternative provisions would be explored. The Children's Commissioner appointed by the Secretary of State was broadly supportive of refreshing the service model and had suggested that the North Yorkshire 'whole system

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approach' model be given consideration. The Council worked closely with Hampshire County Council and would also explore its model.

- Although the current placements at the Old Vicarage had worked well for the four young people who had resided there for the last four years, it was not clear how much alternative provision had been considered at the time that the placements were made. For example, Foster Care may have been a more suitable option as too long in residential care was not good preparation for living as part of a family or within the community.
- The new model needed to carefully match the needs of children and young people with provision and for this to be achieved, there needed to be broader provision than one residential facility which would limit the range of options available.
- The Children's Commissioner was clear that the Council should demonstrate a very clear process. A diverse range of young people were presenting to the Council in need of help and the Council must ensure that a range of options were available, including the option for young people to remain in their own home.
- A Member referred to recent BBC documentary which had highlighted the number of children's homes that were closing, resulting in children and young people having to move, on average, 60 miles from their local area. Responding to the view that the current provision should therefore remain available until a planned decision had been made on the future service model, the Director of People – Children and Adults Services said that placements were always made in the best interest of the child or young person. Recent experience had shown that the Old Vicarage was not always the best option in view of the young person's need or the risks associated with them. The Council had been developing its Foster Care service and additional support was offered to Foster Carers to enable them to provide care in circumstances where they had not previously been prepared to do so.
- There was not a substantial difference between what the Council paid its Foster Carers and those provided by an independent fostering agency, when all costs were taken into consideration. Decisions on where to place children and young people would always focus on what was best for them.
- Although the quality of the environment and accommodation at the Old Vicarage was good, the size and mix of the provision was an issue that would need to be addressed in considering whether it could be used as a new re-purposed provision, given the level of complexity of need of the young people being referred there.
- The option of using the Old Vicarage for out of area young people, generating an income stream, would need to take account of whether, as

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a six bed facility, it was the best option to meet specific demand. If young people were placed there during the review, there would be a degree of uncertainty and instability which would not be in their best interest.

- The young people currently at the Old Vicarage were being kept informed of the situation as part of their pathway plan as they approach the age of 18.
- With reference to the survey to be undertaken as part of the public consultation exercise, the Council would be pleased to accept the offer from Medway Youth Council to promote the survey through its social media presence.
- Out of area placements were considered appropriate in certain situations, in the interests of the safety of the young person who may be vulnerable due to, for example, gang affiliation or a risk of sexual exploitation.
- Children and young people who were placed outside Medway were subject to regular review so that any opportunity to place them back within Medway, if appropriate, would be taken.
- A briefing note for Members would be provided on the placing of high dependency children and young people out of area.
- The Director of People – Children and Adults Services agreed that as part of the service review, the possibility of re-purposing the Old Vicarage within the enhanced model would be explored, to assess whether it could be used to accommodate children and young people who were currently placed out of area.

In conclusion, Councillor Johnson said that he remained unclear why it was proposed to close the Old Vicarage in February 2020, given the degree of uncertainty that remained about the future model for service provision. Noting that the current cohort would soon be leaving the facility and the staff were highly regarded and skilled, he remained of the view that it should be kept open as an outstanding provision for short term placements until the review had concluded. It was noted that a young person had very recently been placed at the Old Vicarage and it was unclear where they would have been placed had the facility already been closed.

The following proposal was then moved:

That the Committee refer decision numbers 123/2019 and 124/2019 back to Cabinet for reconsideration and request that no alteration to the status of the Old Vicarage be made until the review process has been conducted and that a further report is sent to Cabinet when a clear proposal has been made.

On being put to the vote, the proposal was lost.

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In accordance with Council Rule 12.6 the following Members asked that their votes in favour of the proposal be recorded: Councillors Cooper, Howcroft-Scott, Hubbard, Johnson and Price.

**Decision:**

The Committee agreed to:

- (a) accept the Cabinet decision and take no further action; and
- (b) request that a briefing note be provided to Members on the placing of high dependency children and young people out of area.

**Chairman**

**Date:**

**Stephen Platt, Democratic Services Officer**

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