

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

Thursday, 7 January 2021

6.35pm to 0.30am

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), Carr, Cooper, Sylvia Griffin, Hackwell, Johnson, Purdy, Chrissy Stamp, Thorne and Mrs Elizabeth Turpin

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

Clive Mailing (Roman Catholic Church representative) and
Akinola Edun (Parent Governor Representative)

Added members without voting rights:

Archie Bean (Medway Youth Council), Carl Guerin-Hassett (Headteacher Representative), Geoffrey Matthews (Teacher Representative) and Margaret Cane (Healthwatch Medway CIC Representative)

In Attendance:

Sameera Khan, Assistant Head of Legal Services
Karen Benbow, Director of Commissioning, East Kent Clinical Commissioning Groups
Emma Block, Senior Commissioning Officer
Councillor David Brake, Portfolio Holder for Adults' Services
Gill Burns, Director of Children's Services, NELFT
Kelly Cogger, Head of Early Help and First Response
Rebecca Cooper, Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance (Children's Services)
Scott Elliott, Head of Health and Wellbeing Services
Lee-Anne Farach, Assistant Director - Children's Social Care
Aeilish Geldenhuys, Head of Public Health Programmes
James Harman, Senior Public Health Manager
Teri Reynolds, Democratic Services Officer
Ian Sutherland, Director of People - Children and Adults Services
Andrew Willetts, Head of Partnership Commissioning, Resources and Youth Justice
Karen Yusuf, Youth Development Worker

587 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ahmed, Aldous, Barrett, Howcroft-Scott, Osborne and from Fay Cordingley (Church of England Diocese representative), David Lane (Parent Governor representative) and Michelle Dewer (Medway Parent and Carer Forum).

During this period, it was informally agreed between the two political groups, due the Coronavirus pandemic, to run Medway Council meetings with a reduced number of participants. This was to reduce risk, comply with Government guidance and enable more efficient meetings. Therefore, the apologies given reflects that informal agreement of reduced participants.

588 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 1 December 2020 was agreed and signed by the Chairman as correct.

589 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

590 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.

591 Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Adult Services

Discussion:

The Committee considered the report from the Portfolio Holder for Adults' Services which updated the Committee on the activity of the Independent Reviewing Officer team.

Members then raised a number of questions and comments, which included:

- **Recruitment stability** – Members were pleased to see the team was now a fully staffed and permanent team. The Portfolio Holder confirmed

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that a fully staffed and permanent team had been achieved throughout 2020 and that he was made aware when vacancies arise.

- **Dispute Resolution Notices** – reference was made to the information in the report regarding dispute resolution notices. It was explained that the increase was due to the vigilance of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) team and their raising of concerns at the earliest point. Challenging social work practice at earliest point helped to promote and improve permanency for children and ensure that reviews were reaching the standard wanted for Medway’s children in care.
- **Timeliness of reviews** – reference was made to the aspiration of the team to reach 100% in relation to review timeliness and the Portfolio Holder welcomed this ambition to aim high for Medway’s children and young people.
- **Data** – in response to a comment that the data within the report was quite dated, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that he would work with officers to bring more recent data in future appearances.
- **Concerns of a possible spike in caseloads following the Covid-19 pandemic** – The Portfolio Holder confirmed that the impact of the pandemic was a focus for the service, including mental health support.
- **Mind of My Own app** – concern was raised about the lack of use of the app and how much of the young people’s voice was included in the redraft plan for the app. Officers explained that it has gone through a rebranding and Medway has made a further financial commitment to the app and part of that would be a refreshed implementation plan.
- **Missing children** – concern was raised about the lack of information relating to missing children. Officers confirmed that this would be an area that would need to be picked up with the Portfolio Holder for Children Services (Lead Member) when she was held to account at the next meeting, as this did not fall within the remit of the Portfolio Holder for Adults’ Services.

Decision:

The Committee thanked the Portfolio Holder for his attendance.

In accordance with Council rule 12.6, Councillors Cooper, Johnson and Chrissy Stamp requested that their votes in favour be recorded.

592 The Emotional and Wellbeing Impact of Covid-19 on Children and Young People

Discussion:

Officers introduced the report which set out the findings of an assessment into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting initial lockdown on the emotional health and wellbeing of young people in Medway.

Members then raised a number of questions and comments which included:

- **Access to support** – concern was raised that 11% of respondents said they were not getting support and 30% did not know who to contact if they needed support. Officers shared this concern and explained that much work was being done across the wider Emotional Wellbeing offer to address this issue, which included providing resources and training to schools.
- **Impact on schools** – some Members shared their own experiences and concerns relating to the uncertainty in the latter part of school term 2 and the impact of children and school staff having to isolate. Officers acknowledged the difficulties experienced by children, families and schools but explained they had worked within the parameters of clear Government policy and had worked hard with schools to make them as safe as possible. There had been very regular liaison with all schools, the Regional Schools Commissioner and national guidance was tailored into local guidance for Medway schools.
- **Online learning** – concern was raised that a number of children either had no access to devices or were using mobile phones to access online learning. Officers explained that a number of devices had been provided, and although initially these had been without dongles to access the internet, this had since been included and efforts to support children in these situations was ongoing.
- **Bereavement support** – officers confirmed that support was already provided through the Education Psychology Team and through a number of charities within Kent and Medway. However, this was being enhanced by a new service that was currently being commissioned and the inclusion of low level bereavement support through the School Nursing Service.
- **Hungry families** - concern was raised that 2% of respondents said they had often gone hungry and officers concurred with this concern. It was explained that the free school meals offer had been rolled out and the winter support grant had been used to support children over the period of school closures and to support families not eligible for free school meals, through the Early help Child and Family Hubs. Additionally the

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Local Authority had worked in collaboration with local food banks and a number of charities to support vulnerable families.

- **Updated survey** – in response to a question whether another survey would be conducted given much had changed since May 2020, officers confirmed this would be explored and welcomed the opportunity to work collaboratively with Medway Youth Council in formulating that survey.
- **Distribution of information flyer** – in response to a question about how a flyer, providing information about where to ask for support, would be distributed, officers confirmed that a number of avenues were being explored, such as promotion through social media, as well as through schools and other more traditional routes and there was an intention to use young people groups as much as possible.
- **Attendance** – in terms of how schools were recording attendance, it was confirmed that Headteachers formally met remotely every six weeks, and were in contact on a weekly basis. Schools were sharing resources and ideas in order to be consistent in how they logged attendance and supported students and families.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report and recommended officers to report back with a further update in 12 months.

In accordance with Council rule 12.6, Councillors Cooper, Johnson and Chrissy Stamp requested that their votes in favour be recorded.

593 Childhood Obesity

Discussion:

The Head of Health and Wellbeing introduced the report which provided detail of Medway childhood obesity data and of the whole system approach to obesity in Medway.

Members then raised a number of questions and comments which included:

- **Impact of poverty** – officers confirmed that people living in food poverty had a strong correlation with obesity. It was anticipated that the covid-19 pandemic would have had an impact on obesity because of food supplies and the lack of physical activity. However, the pandemic had amplified the importance of the Food Partnership, which was now meeting more regularly to address need related to the pandemic.
- **Healthy weight network event** – officers confirmed this would go ahead but there was a potential for the event to be deferred for a few weeks

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because of the pandemic to ease pressure on NHS and school colleagues.

- **Free School Meals** – Officers explained that over 150 stakeholders had been involved in the response, which showed Medway as a system could respond and that this effort had continued throughout school closures.
- **Exercise referral programme** – officers confirmed that as long as people had a long term health condition they could access the exercise referral programme. In addition officers added that Medway hosted a service where people were referred to the programme for pre-cancer treatment as the success rate and rehabilitation performance was better if their bodies were better prepared.
- **Direct family work** – when a family received confirmation that their child was overweight, officers confirmed that engagement took place with the parents via a phone call, to advise on the services available to families as needed.
- **Whole system approach** – confirmation was made that tackling obesity needed a whole system approach. This included; green travel plans, daily mile activities, sporting facilities and much more. Concern was raised about the capacity of the community and voluntary sector (CVS). Officers referred to the recent in-depth review into the CVS and the actions from that that had recently been agreed by Cabinet, which included developing a Compact between the Council, NHS and CVS and also the creation of a liaison role within the Council to manage relationships with the CVS.
- **Reporting back** – it was recommended that an update on childhood obesity be reported back to the Committee. Officers confirmed that they were due to report to the April 2021 Health and Wellbeing Board meeting on priority areas and therefore suggested that this then be reported to the June meeting of this Committee and that it be reported annually thereafter.
- **Child weight measurement programmes** – concern was raised that the length of time between measuring children at Year R and then not again until Year 6 was a missed opportunity in terms of measuring the impact of interventions at Year R. Officers explained that because the cohort was so large, it gave a really good sample size and made it very reliable data. In addition, it was explained that there was lots of published data nationally about the intervening period between the two measurements and it was likely the findings of this would largely be mirrored at a local level.
- **National intervention** – it was felt that more action was needed from the Government, particularly to tackle the issue around the costs of high calorie foods, compared to fresh produce and also to provide more

information around energy dense foods and the activity needed to burn off the calories. It was suggested that a letter be written to the Government to request more action on this.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report and recommended officers to write to the Government to request further action to be taken to tackle obesity as part of a whole system approach.

In accordance with Council rule 12.6, Councillors Cooper, Johnson and Chrissy Stamp requested that their votes in favour be recorded.

594 Emotional Health and Wellbeing Contract and the Local Transformation Plan Update

Discussion:

Officers introduced the report which updated the Committee on the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Contract and on developments through the Local Transformation Plan.

Members then raised a number of questions and comments, which included:

- **Waiting list** – officers confirmed that the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) had provided additional funding to tackle the long waiting lists in relation to the neurodevelopment pathway (for children aged over 11) which had since improved and was being sustained through the difficulties of the Covid-19 pandemic and activity had in fact increased. Officers across the partnership shared the concerns around this area and confirmed that it was an area with focus for all partners to address the issue across the system and services such as a more enhanced digital psycho-education offer. Officers added that no children under the age of 11 were waiting longer than the national guideline of 18 weeks.
- **Crisis presentations** – it was confirmed that in Medway this remained a challenge, however Medway was starting to even out and fall in line with Kent wide activity.
- **Tier 4 Service** – it was confirmed that the Kent and Medway Adolescent Tier 4 Service contract at Woodlands was successfully transferred in April 2020 and transformation was ongoing. This would impact on the crisis offer and would include a children section 136 suite too.
- **Kooth** – it was suggested that all Members receive a demonstration of Kooth so all Councillors can understand what it was about and its benefits for young people, in their role as Corporate Parents.
- **Engagement with young people** – officers confirmed that in addition to Medway Youth Council, which was mentioned in the report, engagement

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took place with Medway Children and Young People Council and other young people groups.

- **Additional support through schools** – Members welcomed the increase in 18 mental health support workers based within schools and in addition, there was a mapping of all support services available to young people so that the offer could work collaboratively as a system. The mental health support in schools would also be used as one of the main vehicles for developing the wider workforce with the appropriate skills to support children and young people.
- **Capacity to manage a potential covid related increase in demand** – concern was raised that the pandemic and lockdowns would have a negative impact on many young people's mental health and whether there was the capacity to manage a real potential in demand. Officers responded, confirming they were acutely aware and ensuring that communication with young people was clear to ensure awareness of what services and support was available. Work was taking place to prepare for an increase in referrals and this was being done in close liaison between commissioners and providers. Officers also stressed that for many children and young people, their anxiety was a normal reaction to a very unnatural situation and was not a mental illness.
- **Performance monitoring and validating data** – concern was raised about the lack of performance monitoring that had taken place during the covid-19 pandemic. Officers confirmed that the validation of NHS data would ordinarily need to go through a detailed governance process before data was released. During the pandemic, this had been stepped down. Formal contract meetings were time intensive and to respond to the crisis there was a need to provide capacity elsewhere from both commissioners and providers perspective. However, relationships had strengthened in the last year with a more collaborative partnership approach and data was still provided to commissioners on a monthly basis, it just had not gone through the normal validating process.
- **Clinical harm review** – It was explained that any patient on a long waiting list (awaiting any health treatment) needed a clinical harm review, in case their situation deteriorated. Furthermore, in relation to the suicide and self harm prevention work stream, led by Public Health, this had identified a group of 13-16 year olds who raised particular cause for concern and therefore some additional intervention work took place with those individuals to ensure patient safety.
- **Trauma-informed practice** – officers confirmed their intention to provide all Members with information on this and would run a member briefing later in the year.
- **Gender of patients** – in response to a concern raised about the under representation of boys in the service, officers confirmed that there was the same open access for boys and girls and the over representation of

girls was mirrored nationally. Nationally, this was being explored and it was also suggested that the next Medway Youth Council's conference could include this as a strand to explore.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

In accordance with Council rule 12.6, Councillors Cooper, Johnson and Chrissy Stamp requested that their votes in favour be recorded.

595 Sufficiency Report 2020

Discussion:

The Head of Partnership Commissioning, Resources and Youth Justice introduced the report which detailed the outline sufficiency strategy 2020-25, providing a comprehensive review of the support and care provided to children in care and care leavers and how Medway could meet the demand and improve outcomes for children and young people.

Members then raised a number of questions and comments, which included:

- **Balance of cost against outcomes** – comment was made that there was too much emphasis on reducing costs, which was understood and recognised as an important factor but needed to be balanced against improved outcomes for children and young people. Officers confirmed that achieving the best outcomes for children and young people was paramount.
- **Retention in foster carers** – concern was raised about the retention of foster carers and how this was being addressed. Officers confirmed that the whole package for foster carers in terms of pay, benefits, training, development and support was being reviewed to address this issue.
- **Residential and out of area placements** – Officers confirmed that Medway residential provision was always a last resort for children as they were best placed within a family setting. Equally, senior officers met regularly to monitor and review Medway children in high cost out of area placements.
- **Repeat removals project** – in response to a request for more information, officers explained that addressing repeat removals was a key focus for Medway and that Medway was looking at developing a team around the person approach. Officers wanted to put a comprehensive programme together and had identified three cohorts of women that this would target; those at risk of having multiple children taken away (for example because of a presence of substance mis-use, domestic abuse, history of trauma), those pregnant women currently in the social care process and at risk of having their unborn baby removed

and those that have had their baby removed. It was highlighted that there would need to be a strong mental health support element to this programme, with bespoke therapeutic work for these women. The projected savings for the project, set out at figure 34 of the report, were queried, particularly in relation to the reduction in cost of the project in years 3 and 4, and how additional families would be supported in these years, given the reduced figure. Officers explained that recommissioning of services within years 1 and 2 of the project would enable the support to be embedded within new contracts to reduce the project cost, plus taking into account savings of children that would otherwise have been taken into care.

- **Strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ)** – concern was raised in relation to the SDQ results which demonstrated Medway had a higher than average cohort of children in care who have SDQ scores which are “a cause for concern”. Officers confirmed this was an area of focus and extra analysis was being undertaken to see if there had been improvement when comparing the data with the previous year.
- **Responsibility for Special Guardianship Order** – in response to a question about why the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) does not cover Special Guardianship Order placements, officers confirmed that it was felt that the RAA needed time to fully establish itself and in addition, there was a recognition that work relating to SGO placements were often locally based.
- **Fostering to adopt** – concern was raised about fostering to adopt which it was felt put a lot of pressure on foster carers. Officers understood the concerns but explained that permanency for the child/children was always the key focus.
- **Placements for difficult to place children** – reference was made to the more difficult to place children, such as larger sibling groups, older children and those with complex needs, which often were placed with Independent Fostering Agencies. Officers explained that for larger families this reflected national picture of few foster carers being willing to take large sibling groups and there was always a determination to place sibling groups together when safe to do so.
- **Impact of Copvid-19** – officers confirmed that there had been some real challenges because of the pandemic, particularly for placements of children with complex need. Breakdowns had however been minimal and this was continuing to be monitored carefully to ensure families and children were supported where needed.
- **Reduction in Early Help cases** – concern was raised in regard to the fall in families receiving early help support, as detailed at figure 35 of the report, which demonstrated a 50% reduction between August 2019 and August 2020. Officers explained that this was determined by the threshold and for some families it would have been because they met a

different threshold of support that was required. With a renewed look at cases and threshold some of the decline would have been due to a clean up of Early Help figures.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report and recommended it to the Cabinet for approval.

In accordance with Council rule 12.6, Councillors Cooper, Johnson and Chrissy Stamp requested that their votes in favour be recorded.

596 Options Paper Medway Children Assessment Unit

Discussion:

The Head of Service for Partnership Commissioning, Resources and Youth Justice introduced the report which set out options to develop an assessment unit to support with the reunification of children back with families or into more suitable and longer-term arrangements.

Members then raised a number of questions and comments, which included:

- **Children where residential is most appropriate** – with the change in use of the Old Vicarage, concern was raised about how Medway would accommodate children for whom residential care is considered the most appropriate option. In response, officers confirmed that the Old Vicarage was an outstanding facility but had been consistently under used and could no longer meet the needs of children and young people requiring support in Medway. Additionally, it is only a very small number of children who require residential care, a majority of children are best placed in a family setting (if not their own). What had been clearly identified, was the need for a unit to fully assess children to ensure they are then provided with the best placement to suit their needs, which in turn would reduce risks of placement breakdowns and to support reunification with families where it is safe to do so.
- **Savings** – in response to a question about actual savings, officers confirmed that savings for the last financial year was £329,000, with further savings being realised in the current financial year. It was added that the four children whom had resided at the Old Vicarage, had all moved on to successful placements at a reduced cost and had been provided with permanency. One of the four had experienced some difficulties, but these had been addressed and all four were now flourishing.

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- **Service for Medway children only** – officers confirmed the contract would be drawn up to ensure it was a Medway provision for Medway children.
- **Finances** – concern was raised about how reliable the figures were in relation to the £750k that was envisaged to be secured from the sale of the Old Vicarage and where shortfall would come from if this was not the final sum received from the sale of the building. Officers confirmed that colleagues across Planning, Property and Finance Services had been heavily involved in drawing up the funding model and were confident of the figures provided.
- **Registered Manager** – reference was made to the Manager of the Service being able to refuse placement of a child. Officers confirmed this was the case, as set out in law, and was important process in terms of matching residents. However, the Service's Statement of Purpose would be written to support the needs of children and young people that are presenting in Medway now and therefore the risks of being refused would be reduced because the service would be better suited to meet needs than the Old Vicarage had been.
- **Commissioning the service** – Members requested more information as to why the Council should commission the service and not provide it in-house. Officers explained that there were excellent providers already experienced in delivering this model of service, which was something that was not currently in existence within the local authority. In addition, providing the service in-house would risk detracting focus from Medway's improvement journey. An in-house model would also cost more and carries more risk.
- **Age range for service** – in response to a question as why the service was not initially looking at younger children, particularly to ensure early intervention. Officers confirmed that this was based on the data and the sufficiency report. The numbers of adolescents coming through the system needed to be immediately addressed. Early intervention was important however, expanding the service to young age ranges may be something to look at in the future.
- **Provider market and contract** – officers confirmed that light market research had taken place and a number of good or outstanding providers had expressed interest. In addition, officers confirmed that a period of 3 + 2 years was likely to be the contract period.
- **Alternative option** – Members asked why a further option of keeping the Old Vicarage and only purchasing one additional property had not been considered. Officers explained that the reason to use the Old Vicarage initially was to get the service running as

soon as possible as it was needed to meet a demand that already exists in Medway. However, the Old Vicarage site was considered too large for the practical running of an assessment unit and therefore the desire was to subsequently purchase two smaller units. Members however, challenged this, they considered it better to retain the Old Vicarage and purchase just one additional unit, at least initially with then the potential to purchase a second smaller unit if that was proven to work much better for the service, once the service had been tested and was running in practice. The point was also made that this would give flexibility to potentially adapt services and respond to sufficiency as it evolved. Officers acknowledged that the suggested variant to option 4b (detailed within the report) would help mitigate the risks related to sourcing two properties.

Decision:

The Committee recommended Option 4b in providing a Children Assessment Unit across two sites but recommended the Cabinet to agree to purchase one additional unit and consider the possibility of retaining the Old Vicarage as the second site, at least initially, to have the benefit of experience of the service running before deciding whether the purchase of a second property and the sale of the Old Vicarage is the best option.

In accordance with Council rule 12.6, Councillors Cooper, Johnson and Chrissy Stamp requested that their votes in favour be recorded.

597 Early Help (Parenting) Task Group

Discussion:

The Committee considered the report which provided the task group's findings and recommendations in relation to its in-depth review into parenting support within Medway. The task group members thanked officers for their support and paid particular tribute to the parents who had engaged with the task group and shared their personal experiences which had been very valuable and it was suggested that senior officers review the evidence submitted.

Decision:

The Committee forwarded the Task Group report, as attached at Appendix 1 to the report, to the Cabinet for approval.

In accordance with Council rule 12.6, Councillors Cooper, Johnson and Chrissy Stamp requested that their votes in favour be recorded.

598 Work Programme

The Committee agreed the work programme, as attached at Appendix 1 to the report.

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Chairman

Date:

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