

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

Thursday, 5 August 2021

6.30pm to 9.43pm

Record of the meeting

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

Present: Councillors: Kemp (Chairman), Ahmed, Barrett, Cooper, Sylvia Griffin, Hackwell, Johnson, Osborne, Purdy and Tejan

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

Akinola Edun (Parent Governor Representative)

Added members without voting rights:

Carl Guerin-Hassett (Headteacher Representative)

Substitutes: Keith Clear (Substitute for Lisa Scarrott)

In Attendance: Mark Breathwick, Head of Strategic Housing
Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People - Children and Adults' Services
Darryl Freeman, Interim AD for Children's Social Care
Gemma Hancock, Assistant Director – Development & Sales, MHS Homes
Ashley Hook, Chief Executive, MHS Homes
Chris Kiernan, Assistant Director, Education and SEND
Teri Reynolds, Democratic Services Officer
Jacqueline Shicluna, Lawyer (Adults)
Paul Startup, Head of Corporate Parenting
Colin Thompson, Consultant in Public Health

213 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Carr, Howcroft-Scott, Opara, Chrissy Stamp, Thorne and Elizabeth Turpin and from Fay Cordingley (Church of England Diocese representative), Clive Mailing (Roman Catholic Diocese representative) and Lisa Scarrott (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

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Government guidance and enable more efficient meetings. Therefore, the apologies given reflects that informal agreement of reduced participants.

214 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 9 June 2021 was agreed and signed by the Chairman as correct.

215 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none. However, at this point of the meeting the Chairman suggested swapping the order of agenda items 6 (Medway Covid-19 Recovery) and 7 (Medway Youth Council – Annual Report), which the Committee agreed.

216 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

There were none.

Other interests

Councillor Cooper declared an interest in item 7 (Medway Youth Council – Annual Report) as the report referred to the Chief Executive of Rivermead Trust, of which Cllr Cooper was a governor.

Councillor Hackwell declared an interest in item 5 (Member's item: Russell House) as his daughter worked for MHS Homes. He confirmed his daughter did not live with him and he had not discussed the issue with her.

217 Member's Item: Russell House

Discussion:

Councillor Curry introduced his Member's item, which raised concerns about the proposed use of Russell House, Luton as a Foyer Project for vulnerable young people aged 16-25. He explained that the building was in a poor state of repair and was attracting anti-social behaviour, fly-tipping and drug users. He felt the building and the area in which it was based required a great deal of investment and commented that MHS Homes had not undertaken some of the investment they had planned. He added that the community and other agencies, such as the Police, were not supportive of the project due to safeguarding concerns for the young people that would be placed there, in an area with high crime rates.

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The Chief Executive of MHS Homes responded, stating that foyer projects provided much needed accommodation for young people who required support to develop into independent adults. Foyers provided safe 24/7 professional support and supported young people to avoid dangers of becoming engaged in things such as county lines, substance misuse and anti-social behaviour. He added that currently 225 young people were on the list as needing support from such schemes and 38 young people were in the highest priority group. He confirmed there was £3m funding to refurbish the building and that plans included space for community use, dedicated area for PCSOs as well as other agencies. He confirmed that MHS Homes was working with all statutory partners who were working together to ensure all risks and vulnerabilities were mitigated to ensure the foyer project's success.

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

- **Appropriateness of the location** – Members raised concerns about the location of the project and the vulnerabilities of looked after children as well as young people generally. With regards to children in care and care leavers, as corporate parents, Members were concerned about placing vulnerable young people in an area with high crime statistics and high risk of county lines activity. Similar concerns were also raised in relation to young people with learning difficulties who also had increased vulnerabilities. The Chief Executive of MHS Homes confirmed that care leavers were within a sub-group of the cohort of young people that would be considered for a foyer scheme and wouldn't necessarily be placed at Russell House. He also expressed MHS Homes commitment to support and improve the neighbourhood within which Russell House was based and wanted to do this collectively with all agencies to provide multi-agency solutions.
- **Management of the site** – concern was raised about the current management of the site, with overgrown vegetation, lack of CCTV and the poor state of repair of the building itself. The Chief Executive, MHS Homes confirmed CCTV would be included as part of the refurbishment that would take place as well as other refurbishment plans to improve the site.
- **Refurbishment plans** – the Assistant Director, Development and Sales, MHS Homes detailed some of the plans for the foyer project at Russell House, which included; 24/7 support, multiple office areas for PCSOs and other agencies, an accredited learning centre, carefully designed boundary fencing to provide security and natural surveillance, fobbed access, installation of CCTV and enhanced lighting. It was confirmed that there were three planning permissions that had been granted in respect of the refurbishment of Russell House and these were being combined into one project for contractors to undertake.
- **Safeguarding issues** – in response to a question about the safeguarding concerns that Children's Services officers might have regarding the project's location, officers confirmed that although they

could not comment on the specific location at that time, they explained that there were children and young people in every ward in Medway which were of concern for Children's Services and mitigations were put in place to address the concerns. It was also confirmed that the commissioning for all accommodation was part of a very robust quality assurance framework and where providers fell short, officers would work with them to address the issue or withdraw the commissioning of that service.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report and Director's comments and recommended the appropriate authorities (as determined by lead officers) to carry out full analysis of Russell House to determine if it is an appropriate location for a Foyer Project.

218 Medway Covid-19 Recovery

Discussion:

Officers introduced the report which set out how services for children and young people had been working to 'build back better' as part of the recovery strategy from the Covid-19 pandemic. It was confirmed that in relation to children's social care work, the recovery group had been stood down and services had moved back to business as usual and were continuing with a hybrid approach to meetings where it was appropriate to do so, with a more flexible approach being used in the way the service interacted with families, carers and partner agencies. In relation to education services, it was confirmed that the pandemic had resulted in much stronger and effective working relationships with education providers as well as the Regional Schools Commissioner and Public Health. The Headteacher Reference Group, which had evolved into an Education Recovery Group had most recently transitioned into the Medway Education Partnership which was being well attended and included all key stakeholders. Headteachers and education staff were thanked for their hard work and support throughout the pandemic.

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

- **City Hall approach** – in response to question regarding this, officers explained that it was a way of public locality based working and provided a different way of working with young people which supported Medway's ambition to be a Child Friendly City by 2025.
- **Young People in secure estate** – in response to a question about how young people in secure estate had been supported, officers confirmed that at the start of the pandemic it had been difficult as providers had to implement systems to enable remote support but this had been addressed so that by the summer of 2020, visiting in a virtual framework had been fully implemented and young people received virtual contact

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with social workers, youth offending officers and Independent Reviewing Officers as appropriate.

- **Child Friendly City (CFC) and interaction with children and young people** – in response to a query, officers confirmed that, in the context of CFC, interaction with children and young people would be ongoing before 2025 but that currently this was done in lots of different ways with no formalised approach, which officers were developing and building on now in readiness for 2025.
- **Summer activity provision** – in response to a query officers confirmed that the provision of summer activity across schools had been generally low, largely due to capacity issues, post-pandemic exhaustion and where schools were also having to carry out exam moderation.
- **Covid vaccination take up by staff** – in response to a question about how staff were being supported to take up covid vaccinations, officers confirmed that staff were not required to inform the Council, as their employer, as to why they had not taken up the vaccination offer, however, most had been open and for some it was due to being advised not to have the vaccine due to health reasons. It was confirmed that the directorate senior management team were providing ongoing dialogue and encouragement to staff to take up the vaccine and were also now working with Public Health and education colleagues to work with young people and support them with their take up.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report and thanked education staff for their hard work in supporting children and young people during the pandemic in challenging circumstances.

219 Medway Youth Council - Annual Report

Discussion:

Archibald Bean, the Chair of the Medway Youth Council (MYC) for 2020-2021 presented the report which provided the Committee with details from the MYC work on 'Covid: the effect on youth' which comprised of three phases; a mental health and wellbeing support pack, an online survey and a question and answers session. He highlighted the key findings, as set out in the MYC report at Appendix 1 and its recommendations.

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

- **Mental Health** – concern was raised about the ongoing support needed regarding mental health and emotional wellbeing. The previous MYC Chair confirmed that one recommendation was for MYC to continue to work with mental wellbeing organisations to support them in reaching out to young people. He also referred to the waiting lists within the Child

and Adolescent Mental Health Service for over 11 year olds, which was also an area of concern that he felt needed to be addressed.

- **Soft skill development** – comment was made on the loss of opportunity for young people to develop soft skills such as relationships with authority and with peers, which had been caused by the lockdown periods during the pandemic.
- **Distribution of report** – the previous MYC Chair confirmed he had made the same presentation to the Secondary Headteacher Association.
- **Experiences of remote learning** – in response to a question regarding the experience of students during school closures and the impact on their education, the previous MYC Chair explained that many young people had felt that the way mock examinations were managed should have been more flexible and that some people's experience of online learning had been poor. He also referred to the way in which information regarding examinations and grading was handled nationally, which had caused confusion and anxiety amongst young people. Positive experience was also shared in relation to the use of online tools such as MS Teams, where students could find all their assignments, calendar appointments, deadlines and markings all in one place, which had been a positive way forward.
- **Accessibility of the survey** – it was requested that if the MYC ran surveys in the future, could they be provided in a way to make it accessible for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to ensure it also captured the voice of those young people. The previous MYC Chair undertook to feed that back to the current MYC Chair.

The Director of People – Children and Adults Services thanked MYC for the report and explained that the Medway Education Partnership would work to progress the recommendations and findings forward as part of its work, particularly in regard to supporting emotional wellbeing.

Decision:

The Committee noted the Medway Youth Council report, Covid: The Effect on Youth, as set out at Appendix 1 to the report, and the comments from the Director of People – Children and Adults Services and recommended the report be presented to full Council for its consideration.

220 Kent and Medway Suicide Prevention Strategy for Children and Young People

Discussion:

The Public Health Consultant introduced the report which presented the draft Kent and Medway Suicide Prevention Strategy for Children and Young People. He referred to the huge impact suicides have on loved ones and explained that

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of all suicides, around 1/3 were known to mental health services, 1/3 were known to primary care and 1/3 were unknown. He added that the number of children and young people who had committed suicide in the last 3 years could not be reported as it was fewer than 5.

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

- **Self harm** – in response to a question as to whether the Strategy should have greater priority for those who have attempted suicide and who self harm officers explained that there was an adolescent and self harm action plan specifically for Medway and the development of the action plan that would underpin this strategy would need to closely align with that.
- **Trajectory of suicide rates** – officers confirmed that Medway's rates of suicide across adults and children were statistically similar when compared to the England average.
- **Monitoring trends** – in response to a question about how officers monitor data and trends, officers confirmed that they receive weekly real-time surveillance data from Kent Police to enable them to identify and address trends quickly.
- **Faith groups** – suggestion was made to include faith groups within the strategy which officers undertook to review.

Decision:

The Committee recommended Cabinet to approve the Kent and Medway Children and Young People Suicide Prevention Strategy on a page, as set out in section 4 of the report.

221 Proposal to amend the current payment scheme for Medway Local Authority Foster Carers

Discussion:

Officers introduced the report which provided the Committee with changes to the payment scheme for Medway local authority foster carers, which had been approved by Cabinet on 3 August 2021.

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

- **Parent and child placements** – in response to a question regarding these placements, officers confirmed that the funding for such placements came from a different source and was therefore not included in this scheme.
- **Golden hellos** – officers confirmed that these had been looked at but had not been considered necessary at this time, however assured

Members that officers would continue to consider the market in which the local authority operated. It was added that the offer was more than just financial incentives and also related to levels of support and training provided. It was added that the scheme had been worked on for 16 months and had included lots of consultation with foster carers, which had resulted in adjustments to the scheme, following their feedback.

- **Connected carers** – it was confirmed that connected carers do receive payments and financial support and there was a separate team which looked after connected carers. The same mutual expectations existed for connected carers in relation to training and commitment.
- **Missing from placement** – query was made in relation to the wording around missing from placement (page 17 of the payment and allowance policy). Officers confirmed that the seven days wording in the policy related purely to payment decisions regarding fees and allowances and was completely separate to the clear safeguarding process and support given immediately regarding children missing from placement and the work that went into locating the child, resettling them and also to understand why they went missing and what mitigations could be put in place.
- **Numbers of looked after children in Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements** – officers confirmed that the current number of children in care had been 441, 79% of those children and young people were in foster care (i.e., a family setting) which was the aspiration for all children in care and something the Council wanted to increase, as set out in the report. Of the 350 children in foster care, 186 were in local authority foster care settings and 164 were placed with IFAs.
- **Addition to dashboard information** – suggestion was made that the number of children placed in foster care with an IFA should be included in the dashboard data so that Members could monitor and scrutinise progress of the strategies to increase the percentage. Officers undertook to consider this as part of a review of the data targets.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report

222 Progress report - Children's Services Improvement

Discussion:

The Director of People – Children and Adults, introduced the report and referred the Committee to the latest Ofsted letter, which was attached at Appendix 1 to the report. She highlighted the key findings by Ofsted and explained how the emphasis on areas of improvement had shifted to areas where there was a clear interface with partner organisations and added that a

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particular area of concern and focus was regarding emotional health and wellbeing services for children and young people over the age of 11.

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

- **Revised improvement plan** – the Director confirmed that the improvement plan was a live document and was currently being updated in response to the Ofsted letter. She undertook to share the plan with the Committee once it had been refreshed and explained that it would also feed into the People Strategy which would be reported to the Committee in due course
- **Mental health and wellbeing services** – the Director confirmed that she had raised the issues with health colleagues, and it was an area that the Improvement Board would also continue to focus on.
- **Children missing from placement** – in response to concern raised regarding this area of improvement, officers confirmed that this related to children placed at a distance outside of Medway. They explained that this created additional difficulties when working with agencies where those relationships did not exist in the way they did locally, and they provided examples on how partners locally were supporting the Council in bridging those gaps in relationships to help support these vulnerable young people.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report

223 Work programme

Discussion:

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report which set out the Committee's current work programme. She advised the Committee that the vacancy for a teacher on the Committee would be advertised in September, once schools had settled back after the start of term. She also confirmed that the Kent and Medway Children and Young People Suicide Prevention Action Plan would be added to the Committee's work programme.

Decision:

The Committee agreed the work programme as set out at Appendix 1 to the report, including the changes outlined in italics

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Chairman

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